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JOSEPH RITSON  
A CRITICAL BIOGRAPHY

HENRY ALFRED BURD

B. S. Illinois Wesleyan University, 1910

M. A. University of Illinois, 1911

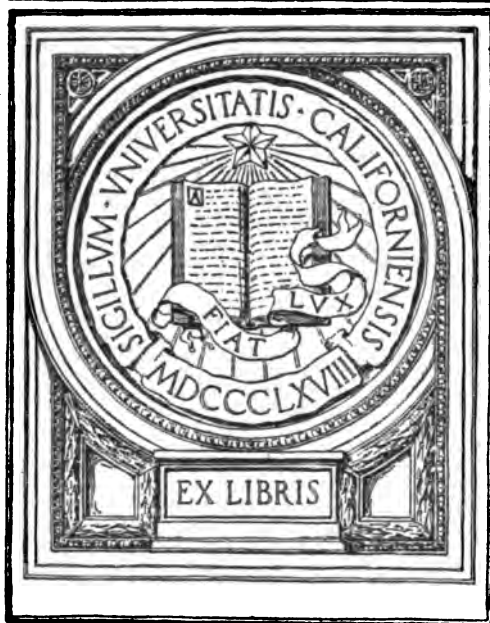
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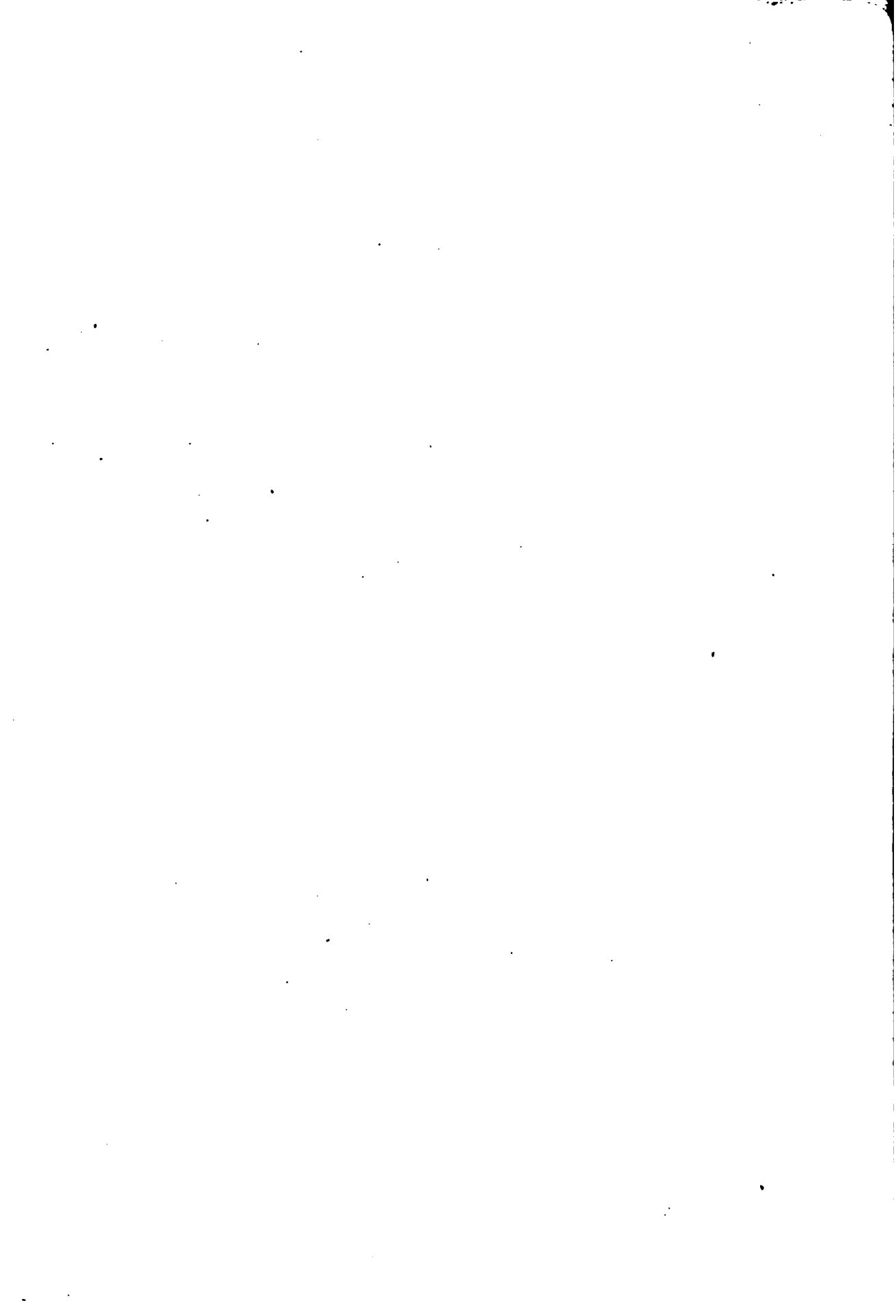
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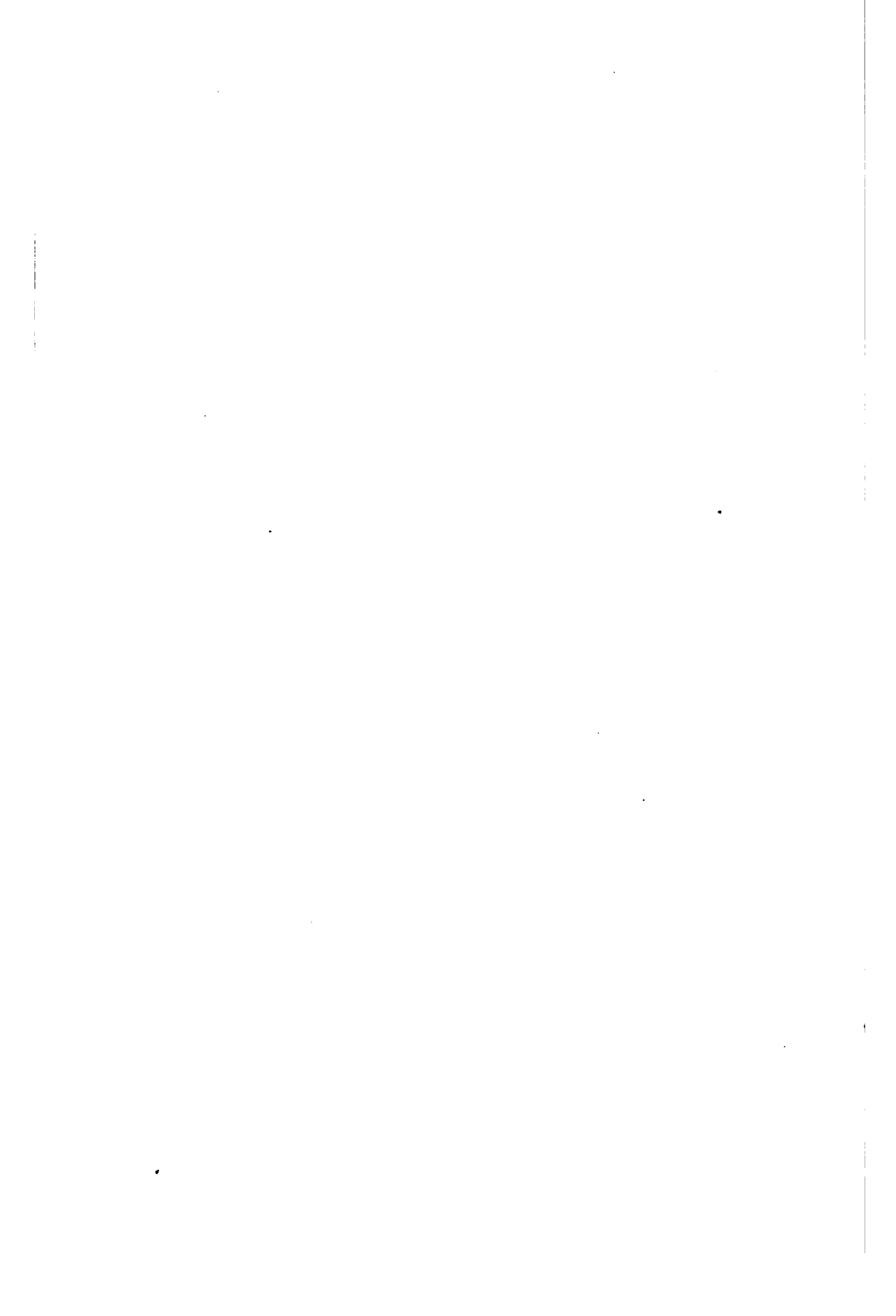
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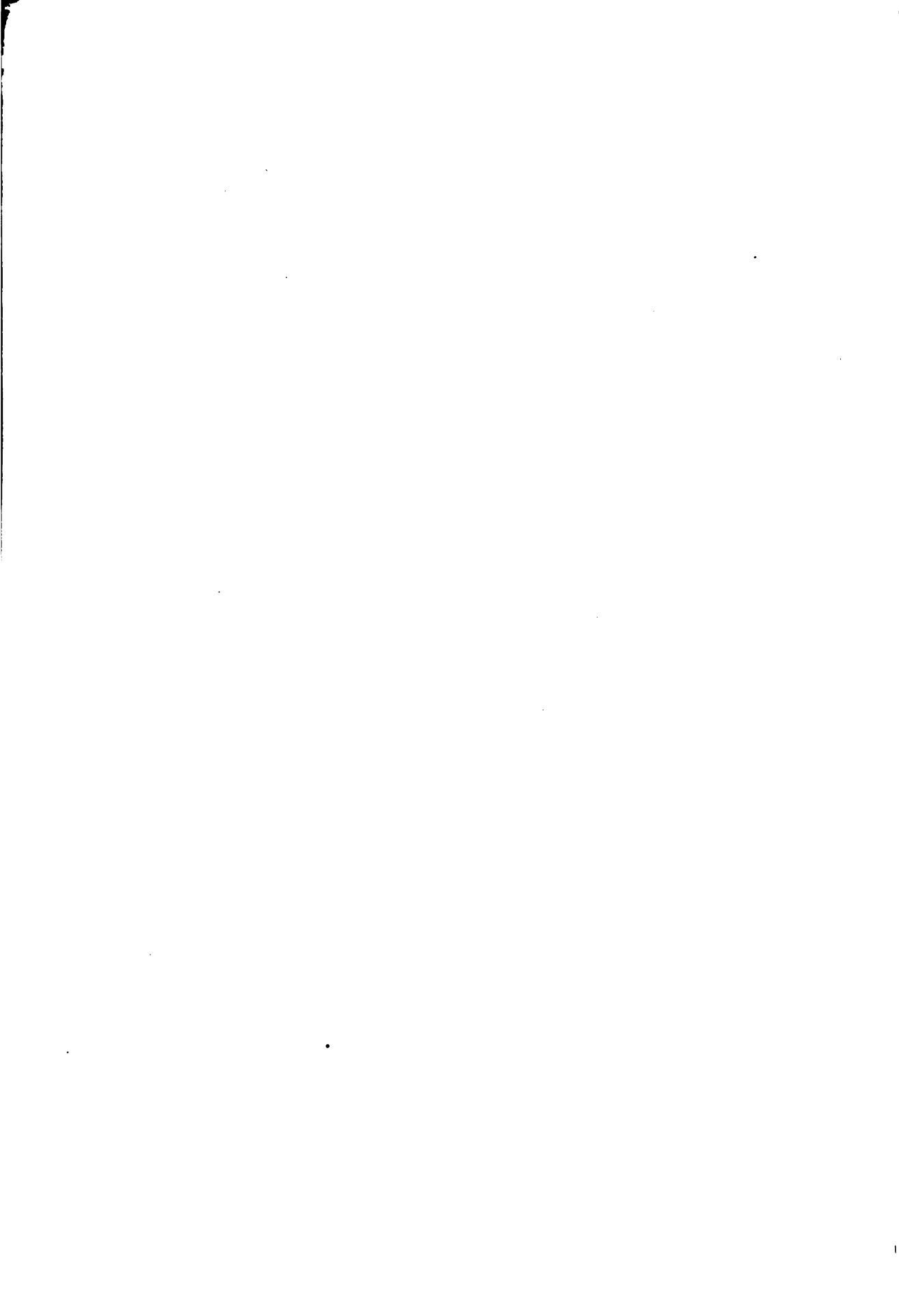


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BY

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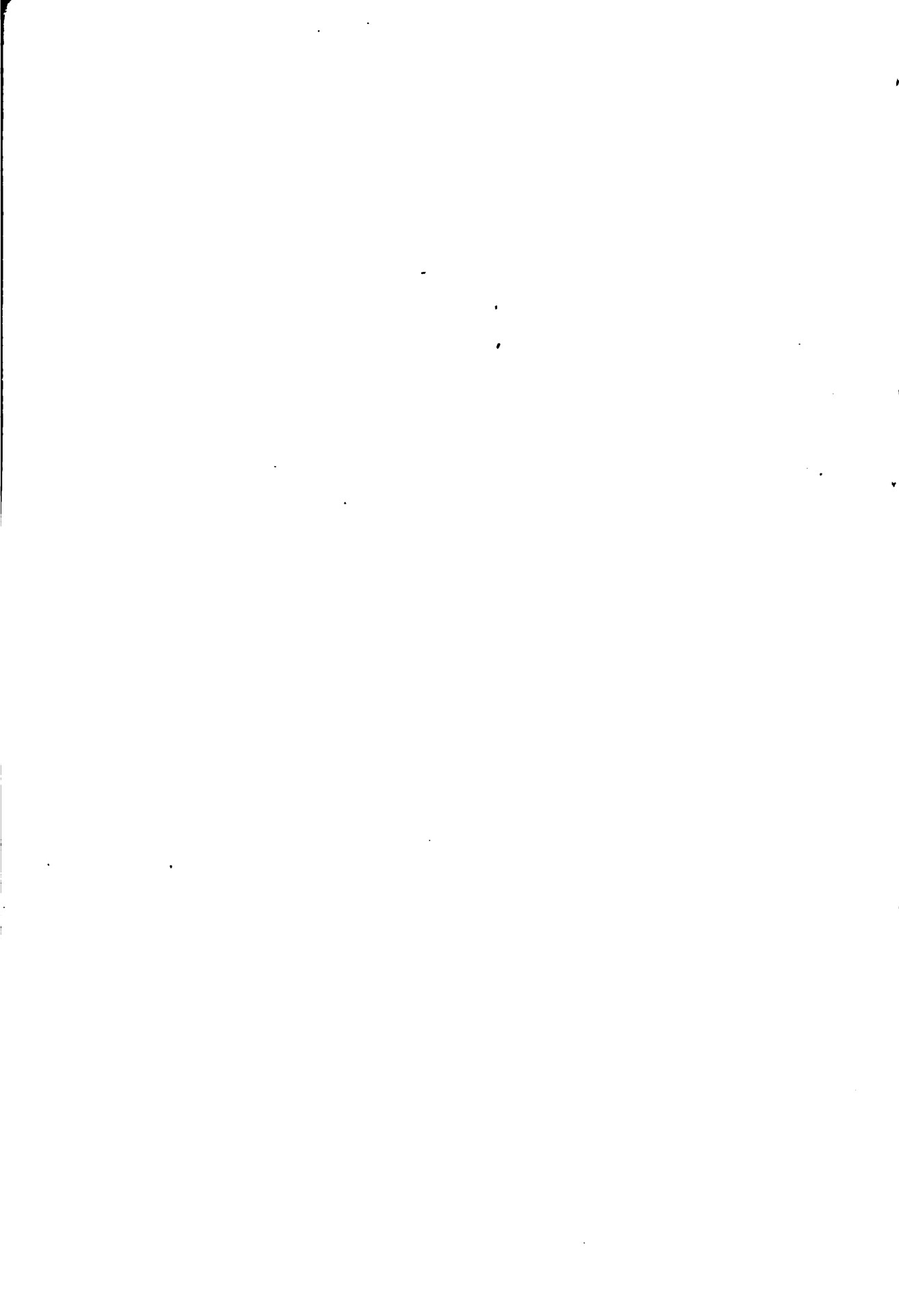
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## PREFACE

Joseph Ritson is a minor figure in the literary history of the latter half of the eighteenth century. But he was one of the chief instruments in bringing about the changes in that period of remarkable transition. Although a potent factor in reviving the interest in ballads and old poetry and in hastening the acceptance of advanced standards of editorship and criticism, he has been largely ignored in the historical appraisal of the romantic movement. This neglect was not altogether unnatural. Ritson's method of criticism was so invidiously personal and his beliefs and habits were so eccentric that attention was attracted primarily to his peculiarities, while his stable qualities were overlooked by the majority. As a consequence of the silence which early enshrouded his name, an adequate estimate of his literary place has, up to the present, been impossible.

There have been three previous biographical treatments of Ritson. Joseph Haslewood's *Life and Publications of Ritson* professes to be, and is, nothing more than a catalogue of the publications. The *Memoir* by Sir Harris Nicolas is primarily a personal account based on Ritson's letters and the reminiscences of his nephew. Whatever critical judgments are essayed are colored by an undisguised endeavor to clear from censure the name of "honest Joseph Ritson". The account by Sir Sidney Lee in the *Dictionary of National Biography* is based mainly upon the *Memoir*. In the present study I have added to this material the contemporary magazine notices and critical reviews, eight letters of Ritson hitherto unnoticed, and frequent comments from the published and unpublished correspondence of other literary men of the time, especially the account of Ritson's death prepared for Percy. Several minor corrections of fact have been made, and, I trust, a major one of emphasis. For I have endeavored, without overlooking the personal peculiarities, to bring Ritson into proper perspective and to estimate his importance in his own day and his influence upon the subsequent course of literature and criticism. The material in Chapter IV is a substantial revision and enlargement of an article on "Joseph Ritson and Some Eighteenth Century Editors of Shakespeare", published in *Shakespeare Studies*, by members of the Department of English of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1916. I presented before the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters, a paper entitled, "Eight

Unedited Letters of Joseph Ritson'', which appears in the *Translations of the Society*, Vol. XIX, Part 1, p. 1 ff.

My obligations in the preparation of this work are too numerous for detailed notice. Special mention must, however, be made of my indebtedness to the authorities of the University of Illinois and the University of Wisconsin libraries for many courtesies; to the librarians of the University of Edinburgh, the Bodleian, and the British Museum libraries for the use of unedited manuscripts; to Sir Sidney Lee for calling my attention to the Selby letters and to Mr. Charles Davis for permission to print them from his manuscript; to Mr. Marsden J. Perry for opening to me his valuable collection of Ritsonianana and to Mr. George Parker Winship for unfailing kindness in making it readily available; to Professor H. S. V. Jones for helpful criticisms; to my colleague Mr. W. E. Alderman for reading the proof; and to Professor W. A. Oldfather for assistance in seeing the work through the press. My greatest debt is to Professor S. P. Sherman, who suggested the subject of this study and who has followed its progress with stimulating criticism.

H. A. B.

Madison, Wisconsin.

## CHAPTER I

### EARLY YEARS; LIFE AT STOCKTON-ON-TEES

Birth—Father—Mother—Family name—Home life—Formal education—Knowledge of languages—Legal apprenticeship—Antiquarian interests aroused—Becomes vegetarian—Publication of *Versees*—Journey to Edinburgh—Early friends: Cunningham, Shield, Holcroft, Brewster, Allan—Settles in London.

Joseph Ritson, son of Joseph Ritson and Jane Gibson, was born October 2, 1752, at Stockton-upon-Tees, Durham.<sup>1</sup> He was the second of a family of nine children, only five of whom survived infancy. The oldest child, Christopher,<sup>2</sup> and John, Sarah, and Elizabeth all died young. Anne, the third daughter, married Robert Frank of Stockton. Her son Joseph, named for his uncle, the subject of this sketch, became the critic's protégé and heir; and it is to him that posterity is indebted for most of the facts of Ritson's life<sup>3</sup> and for the publication of many of his manuscripts. The next child, Sarah, curiously bearing the name of a deceased sister, became the wife of Jonathan Brown of Liverpool. Jane married one Thomas Thompson of Great Strickland. The youngest

<sup>1</sup>The statements by Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century*, etc., VIII, p. 133, note, that Ritson was "a native of Stockton in Yorkshire", and *Illustrations of the Literary History of the Eighteenth Century*, etc., VIII, p. 588, that "Mr. Ritson was born at Stockton, ten miles from York, not at Stockton-upon-Tees", are evidently erroneous. Although Ritson did not employ the full appellation "Stockton-upon-Tees" in his correspondence, there is ample evidence that Durham and not York was his native county. He makes frequent mention of other towns in Durham but not in Yorkshire; his interest in local antiquities of various sorts was centered in Durham (cf. MSS. 4, 6, 10, Appendix C, II); he is designated in the Register of Gray's Inn as the "son of Joseph R. of Stockton, Durham"; and his first publication, the *Versees*, links the Tees with Stockton (ll. 11, 19).

<sup>2</sup>A Mrs. Kirby, a life-long friend of the Ritson family, whose remarks are reported by H. C. Selby in a letter to Bishop Percy (See Appendix A), declares that the first child was a daughter who died insane about the close of the eighteenth century. If this unsupported assertion is to be accredited, the family register must be increased to ten. *Dict. Nat. Biog.* gives eight children, probably omitting the second Sarah.

<sup>3</sup>Frank collected and edited *The Letters of Joseph Ritson, Esq.* London, 1833, and supplied most of the material for the *Memoir of the Author* prefixed to that collection by Sir Harris Nicolas.



daughter, Mary, seems never to have married. Joseph's extant correspondence contains only the meagerest mention of any of his sisters except Anne, but he seems in later life to have been assiduous in visiting the various members of the family on his infrequent journeys to the north of England.

Joseph Ritson senior was, in early life, a menial servant to a Stockton tobacconist and at the time of his marriage served one Robinson, a prominent corn dealer of that place. Later he became a corn grower and as such continued his business relations with Robinson. He seems to have owned nothing but the house he lived in and to have been forced to a hard life to support his large family. The general discontent of the agriculturist class and the disregard of the poor farmer by the moneyed merchant are reflected in his life. Although he had little or nothing to leave his family, their dark outlook was rendered still more forbidding by Robinson's refusal of a final business settlement during the elder Ritson's last illness. During this trying period the son's letters to his father were warm with filial affection and expressed an anxious concern for the whole family. On one occasion he wrote:

"Heaven knows how much I have all along pleased myself with thinking I should be able in a few years to render you some assistance towards making you easy and happy in your old age in return for the education and indulgence you bestowed on me in my youth. . . . I am sorry to hear Mr. Robinson should refuse the small comfort of having your affairs in some degree settled: on such an occasion as this his behavior is unfeeling and inhuman to the highest degree. . . . My heart bleeds to think of the distressed situation the whole family is in. I would to God I could be with you for a day—but alas! I should only add to your confusion. May heaven assist you with patience and resignation in your afflictions. I crave your blessing and earnestly commend myself to your remembrance."<sup>4</sup>

The father died, at no very advanced age, early in the year 1778. Joseph was then struggling for a livelihood in London, unable in any material way to assist the family at Stockton.

Jane Gibson, at the time of her marriage, was a servant in the family of Robinson, in whose service her husband was also engaged. It is not probable that she continued long as a bread-winner, for the burdens of her own family and home must soon have demanded all her attention. An uneducated peasant woman, she bestowed upon her family the simple and unaffected devotion characteristic of her class. The children maintained for her and for each other a deep and permanent affection. It was in relation to his mother that the stolid and undemonstrative Joseph betrayed his finer sensibilities. The illness which termin-

<sup>4</sup>*Letters*, I, pp. 4, 5.

ated in her death began in the spring of 1780. On May 5th of that year Joseph wrote to her: "I have so few, and those such slender connections with mankind, that if we lose you I shall not be very uneasy at anything that might happen to me." In the same letter, in answer to an inquiry from her as to what disposal she should make of her small belongings, he generously says: "It is very much my wish that you should dispose of everything you have to leave in favor of Nanny and her child [Anne Frank and Joseph.]"<sup>5</sup> During the course of the summer he attempted to regale her with accounts of the London riots and uprisings among the lower classes, and she invariably replied with solicitous concern for his health and personal safety. In November, 1780, she died, and the love which Joseph had bestowed upon her seemed almost immediately to be diverted to his sister and her young son, for whom he had an affection almost paternal throughout the remainder of his life.

The Ritson family name was, according to Joseph, a corruption of Richardson. In his "Memoranda" he records the genesis of the word thus: "Richardson, Richison, Richson, Ricson, Ritson." But it is highly doubtful if there is any other authority than personal fancy for this evolution. The name was, however, of considerable antiquity in Westmoreland and Cumberland, as it occurs in the parish register of Lowther at its commencement in 1550. But even with this assistance and with his own antiquarian interests Ritson was able to trace his pedigree with certainty only as far back as a great-grandfather Christopher Ritson, who died in 1703. This branch of the family belonged to the poor but respectable yeomanry of the north of England where it had held property for four generations.

From what is known of Joseph's immediate family, it is evident that life in the Ritson home must have been simple and affectionate. The necessity for the daily practice of economy in the material comforts of life in no way decreased but rather augmented the mutual love and sympathy of the family. Only one element, the religious atmosphere characteristic of the English middle and lower class families, seems to have been lacking. There is no evidence in the lives of the children so far as they are known, nor in their letters, to indicate Christian training. Neither is there any token in the early life of hostility to religious matters. The home seems only to have been non-religious, not irreligious. Joseph Ritson, reared in such a home, was no unnatural product of his environment. That there was a distinctly human side to his character, no one who has taken the trouble to look into his correspondence will deny. Yet the oft repeated remarks of cynical critics, who would paint him as an ogre who never fed on the milk of human kindness, make it

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, I, pp. 12, 13.

necessary to point out that, however virulent and sarcastic he may have been towards certain editorial malefactors, he was, to his friends and family, a singularly generous, kind-hearted, and sympathetic man.

Ritson's formal education was quite limited but was no doubt the equal of that of most lads of his station in life. His only schoolmaster was the Reverend John Thompson of Stockton, afterwards vicar of Warden in Northumberland. It is reported that he often spoke of Ritson as one of his best scholars and was accustomed to relate some anecdotes indicative, even in his youth, of those mental eccentricities for which he was afterwards so noted.<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere he has been described as "clever at his books and an apt scholar." As a lad at school he constantly shunned the company of other boys. He endeavored to associate with the girls, but they avoided him as much as possible, and he was consequently a half-voluntary outcast. Being much alone he grew morose and secretive and could be dislodged from his meditations by only one or two girls whom he secretly feared.<sup>7</sup>

The exact studies which Ritson pursued at Stockton are not definitely known. On the question of his knowledge of languages there is difference of opinion. It has been said of him that he was "totally unacquainted with the Greek and Latin languages",<sup>8</sup> and again, that he was "ignorant of Greek and self-taught in Latin".<sup>9</sup> He knew no Greek and seems never to have felt his ignorance of it a handicap in his work.<sup>10</sup> At any rate he was very emphatic in urging his nephew not to "waste his time" in studying it. His estimate of the comparative value of Greek and Latin is clearly stated in a letter to his charge, June 4, 1785:

"You should pay all possible attention to Latin and writing. I do not apprehend Mr. Pattison can put you into Greek this summer, but if he should, I desire that you not waste your time in acquiring any more knowledge of that language, than consists in reading it with facility from a familiarity with the characters, though you should not understand a word. Latin will be useful to you, not Greek, and I beg you will pay no regard to any one who tells you otherwise."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Memoirs of Ritson, in Brewster's *History of Stockton*, 1829, p. 370.

<sup>7</sup>Mrs. Kirby claims the distinction of being able to do anything she pleased with the eccentric youth, "he was so much afraid of her".

<sup>8</sup>Review of "Homer's Hymn to Venus", *Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. LXXIII, ii, p. 1031.

<sup>9</sup>DeQuincey's *Works*, ed. Masson, 1896. Vol. VI, p. 23, note.

<sup>10</sup>The only remark which might be construed as expressing remorse at his ignorance of the classics appears in a letter to Robert Harrison, Aug. 22, 1795. He is lamenting the inefficiency of the modern writers of ancient history: "Did we but all understand Greek and Latin as well as you do . . . my historian . . . should not be suffered to write a line." *Letters*, II, p. 99.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 102.

But Ritson was certainly familiar with the Latin language. Its rudiments, at least, were made familiar by composition and construing at Thompson's parish school. Although he may not have been critically skilled, he made constant use of it in his literary labors. Many of his sources exist only in that language, and his quotations from the Roman writers are apt and numerous. His knowledge of French, Italian, and Spanish was likewise sufficient to enable him to use them extensively. It may be doubted, however, if he secured much acquaintance with any of these tongues—except perhaps French—at school. His frequently acknowledged ignorance of German is not at all surprising.

In these early school days Ritson evidently began to cultivate the interest in history, old plays, songs and ballads, which later became his hobby and finally the absorbing interest of his life. In the letters to his nephew, whose early education he supervised and directed by correspondence from London, is to be found the chief expression of his own preferences as a child and a confession of the deficiencies in his early training. Writing in 1780 to his six year old nephew he says: "I have sent you a few books, &c, such as I was most entertained with, and instructed by, when I was at your own age; and I hope they will answer as good a purpose, if not a better to yourself. . . . You will find some few plays, and other things, which you may like better, perhaps, and know more of as you grow bigger."<sup>12</sup> The next year he sends him "a history of England, and a little book of childish songs", and commends him for "getting by heart so excellent a poem as *Chevy Chase*."<sup>13</sup> A few months later he sends a collection of prints, pencils, and paints. "The prints are mostly such as I was very fond of when I was rather older than you are," he writes; "and the drawing book I still think a very pretty one." At the same time he commends *Don Quixote*, "which is one of the best books ever written", and *Mother Goose's Melody*, which is "an excellent thing."<sup>14</sup> By the time Frank is seven years old Ritson advises him to write verses on the model of *Mother Goose*, adding significantly: "I regret nothing so much as that I did not make a practice of committing all such little things to writing the moment I heard them."<sup>15</sup> His early education, so far as it went, was thorough, but advancement was due largely to his own unaided efforts. In later years he felt keenly the lack of intelligent and sympathetic guidance in his formative period, and endeavored to supply this want in the life of his young nephew.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 11.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, I, pp. 28, 29.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 42.

Formal education beyond that to be obtained in the local school was, of course, out of the question for one in Ritson's station. There was a large family to support, and economic considerations made it imperative for the oldest son to contribute as early as possible to the family budget, or, at least, not to make any considerable drains upon it. Accordingly Joseph was put to work at an early age. It was perhaps just as well that he remained at home. As a youth he was sensitive, studious, and inclined to be secretive. At Stockton he had opportunity for private reading, and intimate daily contact with his fellows served as an antidote to the eccentric tendencies of his nature.

Being designed for the law, Joseph was at first apprenticed to a solicitor Raisbeck of Stockton, a son-in-law to Robinson, the corn merchant with whom his father dealt. His stay with Raisbeck was probably short, and he was subsequently removed to the office of Ralph Bradley,<sup>16</sup> a distinguished conveyancer of Stockton. Here he remained as long as he was a resident of Stockton. Bradley knew his business extremely well and kept his apprentices close at their tasks. In 1772 Ritson wrote to John Cunningham, the poet: "I have never had a day nor the offer of a day (except Sunday) from my master since I entered his office." Ralph Hoar and John Crathorne, apprentices to Bradley together with Ritson, both remained on terms of intimacy with him during life. Joseph applied himself with considerable diligence and evidently proved an apt student. Bradley is reported to have "described young Ritson's abilities as too great to be wasted in such a place as Stockton",<sup>17</sup> and it may be conjectured that it was at his master's suggestion that he decided to settle in London.

During his apprenticeship the duties of the office occupied a large portion of his time, but he undoubtedly found more or less leisure for non-professional reading according to his own fancy. Early visitors to Stockton report that Ritson, "like most young men of taste and talents", was more fond of reading poetry and ancient history, than law.<sup>18</sup> That these early marked the chief lines of his interest is evident from the degree of familiarity with them exhibited in his first publications. His concern with poetry was deep and permanent and not long after his departure from Stockton almost completely overshadowed the interest in other antiquities which was taking root in these years.

<sup>16</sup>The name is mistakenly given "Bindley", in *Dict. Nat. Biog.* The exact dates of these changes are not known. Mrs. Kirby says Ritson was apprenticed to Bradley upon quitting the Latin school, and remained with him some year or two. See Appendix A.

<sup>17</sup>Nicolas, *Op. cit.* p. iii.

<sup>18</sup>See Holcroft's *Memoirs*, London, 1852, p. 93.

Conditions in northern England at the end of the third quarter of the eighteenth century were peculiarly fit for the making of an antiquarian. Durham and the surrounding counties were rich in British and Roman antiquities. Northumberland was widely known for its pre-Roman antiquities of various sorts. Within Ritson's reach were Hadrian's great wall, the Devil's Causeway, the London road, and various camps and cairns. At Newcastle-upon-Tyne, where he had many friends, were the ancient church and university buildings, and there, in 1771, excavations brought to light the river bridge constructed by the emperor Hadrian. In the county seat of Durham, where Ritson must have gone occasionally on professional business, was the magnificent cathedral founded in 1093, by William de Carilepho, in which lay the remains of St. Cuthbert, brought thither from Lindisfarne, and of Venerable Bede, removed from Jarrow.<sup>19</sup> All of these relics of antiquity served to interest Ritson in the ancient history of his own county, and he early collected sufficient material to make him of valuable assistance to George Allan in his projected *History of Durham*, and to Richard Gough in the 1780 edition of his *British Topography*.<sup>20</sup> His early letters from London are replete with references to the antiquities of Durham, and he never through life lost interest in them.

Among the books which Ritson read at Stockton was one which influenced the whole of his subsequent life. Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*, which formed the basis of one of the influential schools of thought of the early eighteenth century, was the direct cause of his forswearing animal food at the age of nineteen. It was, moreover, the source of his inspiration in other ways of which he was not aware, and which his biographers have overlooked. In his *Essay on Abstinence from Animal Food as a Moral Duty*, published in 1802, he recounts the circumstances in the following words:

"The compiler himself, induced to serious reflection, by the perusal of Mandeville's 'Fable of the Bees', in the year, 1772, being the nineteenth year of his age, has ever since, to the revival of this sheet, firmly adhered to a milk and vegetable diet, having, at least, never tasted, during the whole course of those thirty years, a morsel of flesh, fish, or fowl, or anything to his knowledge prepared in or with those substances or any extract thereof, unless on one occasion, when tempted by wet, cold and hunger, in the south of Scotland, he ventured to eat a few potatoes dressed under the roast; nothing less repugnant to his feelings to be had; or except by ignorance or imposition; unless it may be in eating eggs, which, however, deprives no animal of life, though it may prevent some from coming into the world to be murdered and devoured by others."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup>*An Account of Durham, &c.*, Durham, 1804.

<sup>20</sup>Ritson's antiquarian services are more fully discussed in Chapter III.

<sup>21</sup>*Abstinence from Animal Food*, pp. 201-2.

The determination at so early an age to forswear animal food, and the adhering to that determination in the face of thirty years of good-natured ridicule by his friends and of bitter satire by his enemies, is highly characteristic of the man. After his death his Pythagorean diet was pointed to as proof of the contention that he had always been half-mad, or, at least, that the germs of insanity had been ever present. That there was a connection between the meager diet, the ill-nourished body, and the alienated mind cannot be doubted, but as we shall have occasion later<sup>22</sup> to examine the nature of this connection somewhat more fully, it may be dismissed for the present. One thing, however, should be borne in mind. Far from being a mere fad, Ritson's vegetarian resolution was founded on deep and honest conviction and arose from a refined sense of humanity. There is no trait of the gentler side of his nature—the comparatively unknown facet of his character—that is more uniformly expressed throughout his correspondence than his love for the animal creation.

In 1772 appeared Ritson's earliest known publication and the only extant literary work of his Stockton years. This was a poem of 98 lines contributed to the *Newcastle Miscellany* under the caption *Versees Addressed to the Ladies of Stockton*.<sup>23</sup> The first 30 lines of this youthful production, in the nature of a general introduction to the individual "addresses", suggest the sentiment of the *Deserted Village* and point clearly to Ritson's interest in the romantic history of the North.

Accept, ye Fair, the tribute of my praise,  
And deign a smile upon my humble lays;  
For your applause i strike the tuneless lyre,  
And strive to raise within a poets fire:  
In hobbleing verse your charms attempt to sing;  
Your charms adorn'd with ever blooming spring.

Ye female critics, read, sans spleen, my song,  
Nor deem it or too languid, or too long;  
For Your applause i write, your Frowns i fear;  
Hence, fellows! hence! Your judgment's nothing here.  
Let not harsh censure my poor rhimes asperse,  
But with the Subject dignify the verse.

Where Tees in sweet meanders slowly glides,  
And gently murmuring rolls his easy tides,  
There stands a town, with peace and plenty crown'd,  
For wit, for wealth, and loyal sons renown'd;

<sup>22</sup>See Chapter VIII.

<sup>23</sup>Reprinted at Stockton, n. d., and again as an Appendix to Haslewood's *Life of Ritson*, etc., 1824.

Far fame'd for dames, wise, charitable, chaste,  
 And first in Beauty's annals ever place'd.  
 In every age has STOCKTON been rever'd,  
 Her sons have always been belove'd and fear'd.  
 When, 'gainst the hardy legions of the North,  
 Brave Percy led his youthful warriors forth,  
 Her valiant deeds let History proclaim,  
 And Cheviot hills record the fatal name.  
 Her nymphs erst wont to trip the verdant groves,  
 Seem'd sisters to the Gracees and the Loves.

Leave these, my muse, and sing, in careless rhimes,  
 The special beauties of her modern times;  
 Let them alone engage thy every care,  
 Speak but the truth, and paint them as they are.

The remainder of the poem consists of eleven stanzas extolling the virtues of as many of the "Ladies", each designated by a name rich in literary associations: Titania, Olivia, Daphne, Chloe, Phillis, etc.

This youthful, amatory poem, without intrinsic merit, has a three-fold interest to the student of Ritson's life. It marks the beginning of a thirty years' connection with the press. It exhibits the earliest specimen of Ritson's peculiar orthography. In this private system as now employed the first personal pronoun is written with a small letter, and words formed with suffixes are invariably given their full form.<sup>24</sup> From a letter written to Isaac Reed, to whom he presented the copy for the *Versees* from which the above quotation is taken, it does not appear that he had then any intention of employing his system of orthography further. "I beg your acceptance of the enclosed", he writes, "as the only specimen of *my* system of spelling that ever was, or, perhaps, ever will be printed."<sup>25</sup> But the promise here held out was not lived up to, for Ritson's volumes were marred with eccentricities of spelling up to the very last.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, the *Versees* suggests a question as to the extent and permanence of Ritson's interest in the writing of poetry. Several years

<sup>24</sup>Cf. *versees*, hobbleing, gently, wonderous, riseing, etc.

<sup>25</sup>August 29, 1782. Quoted from Haselwood, *Some Account of the Life and Publications of the late Joseph Ritson, Esq.*, London, 1824, Appendix. Haselwood is "certain that the orthography of *Versees* was not adopted by him so early as the year when the lines were first printed", p. 5, note.

<sup>26</sup>Ritson's orthography is more fully discussed later. See especially Chapters IV and VIII.



afterward he wrote a long versified epistle to his friend Ralph Hoar, in which appear these lines:

This many a year I have not made  
Two lines of verse, though once my trade  
You know it was—No, you can't tell,  
But I can yet remember well.  
When care was to my youth unknown,  
My fancy free, my hours my own,  
I lov'd i' th' laureat grove to stray,  
The path was pleasant, prospect gay;  
But now my genius sinks, nor knows  
To make a couplet tink i' th' close.<sup>27</sup>

It may, of course, be questioned whether Ritson's reference to poetry as "once my trade" means any more than that as a youth he wrote frequent exercises in verse such as every boy interested in literature attempts at some time or another. Such an interpretation lends color to Haslewood's otherwise unsubstantiated remark that Ritson "once intimated a claim to another poetical effusion" that appeared in the *Newcastle Miscellany*. But if Ritson's statement is to be taken literally, there is no need to lament the fact that he forsook the Muses for criticism and antiquarianism. Scholarship gained much thereby and Poetry lost nothing.

Toward the close of 1773 Ritson made an archaeological trip to Edinburgh. His diary records the fact that he went on foot, subsisted on a vegetable diet, and suffered the hardships incident to his mode of travel. It was at this time that he began his acquaintance with the Advocates' Library, where he spent many delightful hours. His antiquarian zeal led him to spend so much money for ancient Scottish books<sup>28</sup> that he was unable to pay for his lodging until a fellow traveller became so much interested in his discussion on the Battle of Flodden Field that he paid his reckoning for him. The concluding entry from the diary of this tour is one of the few intimate personal remains of the man.

"Friday, got my shoe mended; set off at eight, and after walking twelve hours, most of it in a heavy rain, arrived safe at home, after an absence of twelve days. The length of time I had been absent, the distance of my journey, and the vicissitudes of weather and pocket, the change of lodgings, and the many hardships

<sup>27</sup>"New Year's Day, 1787", *Letters*, I, p. 123.

<sup>28</sup>The line of his interest is indicated by the following books which he purchased, among others, on this trip: Robert of Pitscottie's *Chronicles of Scotland, 1436-1565*, Edinburgh, 1738; Thomas Ruddiman's *Dissertation Concerning the competition for the crown of Scotland, 1748*; and David Moyses's *Memoirs of the Affairs of Scotland, 1577-1603*, Edinburgh, 1755.

I had experienced in my little tottr, all contribute to make the time of my arrival at home the happiest moment of my life."<sup>29</sup>

Not the least important factors of Ritson's early years were the friendships formed at Stockton with men of literary talents and anti-quarian tastes. His first known letter was written to John Cunningham (1729-1773), itinerant actor and small poet, who spent his dissolute life with strolling companies in the north of Britain and wrote occasional prologues, a farce or two, and some pastoral poems of slight merit. Cunningham met Ritson, then a young legal apprentice with literary aspirations, and immediately fell heir to his homage. They corresponded infrequently during the period of Cunningham's voluntary retirement to Newcastle where he was waiting "till my health either seems to return, or totally abandons me". The following letter from Ritson supplements the two from Cunningham given by Nicolas.<sup>30</sup>

Montagu d. 15, fol. 219, 219b.

STOCKTON, Friday

. th Augt. 1772

DEAR SIR

The pleasure I received from your agreeable favor was a little damped by your treating as *Flattery* the most sincere Expressions my pen could commit to paper.

I can have small hopes of enjoying the least share in your Thoughts when you will not believe me if I speak Truth. But I had rather that you should tell me I lye than a 1000 others I could name should commend me for speaking Truth.

As to your Expectations of seeing Lanc.<sup>31</sup> and me at Durham in the Race Week. I am sorry they had so bad a foundation. The pleasure I would have received from seeing you would have abundantly compensated for any trouble I might have been at in the Journey. But as I have never had a Day nor the Offer of a Day (except Sunday) from my Master since I entered his office, I never could have expected to succeed had I asked him. I believe Lanc. is much in the same Situation. Yet I hope (as it is likely we shall have Races) I shall enjoy that pleasure before *Christmas*—& if you are not inrolled in the List of ye Racing performers I have a little Expectation of seeing you at Whitby then.

I am exceedingly glad your Benefit at Darlington turned out to your Satisfaction. You say "you have often Experienced the friendship of Darl.<sup>32</sup> as well as Stock.<sup>33</sup>"—long very long may you continue to enjoy the Friendship of

<sup>29</sup>Nicolas, *Op. cit.* p. v. Ritson later exhibited a decided antipathy to Scotchmen, but there is no indication that it was "acquired" on this journey, as Sir Sidney Lee states in *Dict. Nat. Biog.* Cf. Chapter VII.

<sup>30</sup>pp. viii-ix. Cunningham's letters are dated respectively June 19, 1772 and July 23, 1773. Ritson's letter is evidently in reply to the first of these.

<sup>31</sup>Probably a fellow apprentice, Lancaster.

<sup>32</sup>Darlington.

<sup>33</sup>Stockton.

both. Tho' Merit is seldom rewarded so well as it should be—Yet the Place must be a damn'd stupid one indeed to let it be neglected.

We have had the "famous and unparalleled" Mr. Jonas the Jugler here—his Visit indeed was only short but as he performs his Part much better than any other Pretender to the Art—the Spectators are as much pleased as astonished.

There is not the least Necessity for the Letters you honor me with "to be left at Mrs. Barkers".<sup>34</sup> Directed to J. Ritson at Ra: Bradley's Esqr Stockton they will be much sooner received as I seldom know there is a Letter till three or four Days afterwards.

My imagination's so shallow, it is the most vain Undertaking possible, for me to pretend corresponding with you. Yet if my stupid Letters have only the good fortune to procure one in return—I am happier than if I were the Author of Mr. Pope's Literary Correspondence.

I am

Dear Sir

With the greatest Respect

Your most humble Servant

J. Ritson Jun

Ritson's interest in Cunningham continued for some years. At the time of the poet's death he collected a great many newspaper clippings concerning him, and from these and his personal knowledge wrote a short biographical sketch.<sup>35</sup> He printed several of Cunningham's songs in his edition of *English Songs*,<sup>36</sup> and in the "Historical Essay on National Song" which precedes that collection, included this unbiased estimate of his poetic ability:<sup>37</sup>

"Cunningham, though not equal to his countryman [Goldsmith] in native genius, and still less so in learned application, possesses a pleasing simplicity which cannot fail to recommend him to a reader of unadulterated taste. This simplicity may, perhaps, in some of his compositions, be thought too great; but when it is known that they were necessarily adapted to the intellects of a country theatre, little censure can be justly incurred by the poet."

During the early days of his acquaintance with Cunningham, Ritson met William Shield (1748-1829), the famous musical composer whom Cunningham had been instrumental in placing in an advantageous position as a director. Ritson remained on terms of comparative intimacy

<sup>34</sup>Ritson's landlady.

<sup>35</sup>The "Life" was printed by Nicolas, Op. cit. p. vii, note. "Cunningham's Poems, with an account of him in manuscript by Mr. Ritson, and extracts from Newspapers respecting him", formed Lot 808 of the sale of Ritson's library.

<sup>36</sup>*A Select Collection of English Songs*, 3 vols, 1783. References are to second edition, 1813, I, pp. 230, 236; II, p. 165. Another song is included in *The Northumberland Garland*, etc., 1795, p. 69.

<sup>37</sup>*English Songs*, I, pp. xc-xci. See also *Letters*, I, p. 144, and Walker's *Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards*, 1786, p. 85.

with Shield until death. He seems to have written at least one song which Shield set to music and to have contributed others.<sup>38</sup> The notation of the music for his collections of *English* and *Scotish Songs* was done largely by his friend. Nor did he hesitate to call upon Shield to supplement his deficient musical knowledge when he was endeavoring to take down ballads from oral tradition.<sup>39</sup> It was in company with Shield that Ritson made his only continental tour, a visit to France in 1791.<sup>40</sup>

Thomas Holcroft (1744-1809), afterward famous for his liberal views on politics and religion, was a third member of the strolling theatrical companies whose acquaintance Ritson made at Stockton. The exact date of their meeting is not known.<sup>41</sup> It may have been on one of Ritson's visits to Durham or Newcastle, or when Holcroft's company played at Stockton; and it is highly probable that Cunningham, Shield, and Holcroft, on one of their companionable pedestrian expeditions to the outlying towns, called upon Ritson in a body. Later, after both Ritson and Holcroft had settled in London and a similarity of views had drawn them together, their friendship was kept fresh by frequent intercourse.<sup>42</sup>

Two other early acquaintances of Ritson deserve mention because of their part in arousing and advancing his antiquarian interests. John Brewster (1753-1842), a native of Newcastle, was officially connected with the church at Stockton from 1776 to 1805. His life-long interest in the antiquities of Stockton and his later reliance on Ritson for assistance in his publications,<sup>43</sup> seem to point to an acquaintance, however cursory, before the critic left Stockton. But it was to George Allan (1736-1800) the famous antiquary of Darlington, that Ritson was most deeply indebted for his interest in the local antiquities of Stockton.<sup>44</sup> His friendship with Allan was long and their correspondence extensive. While at Stockton he laid himself under obligations to Allan for material and for valuable suggestions for his work, and when he went to London

<sup>38</sup>Nicolas, *Op. cit.* p. vi. The information comes from some notes of Ritson to Shield, then in the possession of Joseph Frank but never published.

<sup>39</sup>*Letters*, II, p. 221.

<sup>40</sup>See Chapter VIII.

<sup>41</sup>According to his *Memoirs*, pp. 92-3, Holcroft must have met Ritson sometime between the spring of 1776 and the fall of 1777, but this is obviously impossible. At the time of their meeting Ritson is described as "a young legal apprentice of that place [Stockton]", but he was settled in London by the beginning of 1776, probably late in 1775. They must then have met before Holcroft joined Bates's company which included Stockton in its 1776-7 tour.

<sup>42</sup>For a discussion of their later connection see Chapter VIII.

<sup>43</sup>See Chapter VI.

<sup>44</sup>See Chapter III.

it was chiefly through the instrumentality of Allan that he was early afforded the opportunity of carrying on his literary researches there.

The exact date of Ritson's departure for London is not known. It has been variously stated that he left Stockton "as early as his twentieth year",<sup>45</sup> "in his twenty-second year",<sup>46</sup> and that he "settled in London in 1775".<sup>47</sup> However, it is evident from a letter written from Stockton, April 19, 1775,<sup>48</sup> that he had not yet left his native town and at that time saw no prospect of getting farther than its immediate neighborhood. In an unpublished letter of John McLaren to Barnslie Toleman, dated "Stockton, Nov. 5, 1775", "Mr. Joseph Ritson, a young gentleman of this place", is commissioned with a small errand.<sup>49</sup> The earliest extant letter written from London is under date of August 26, 1776.<sup>50</sup> It appears, then, that it was not earlier than the end of 1775 or the beginning of 1776 that Ritson took his leave of Stockton. In all likelihood he walked the 250 miles to London, and his baggage was probably light, for we are told that he "used to take his journeys on foot, with a couple of shirts in his pocket, and if he found his bundle too heavy, he would, without hesitation, throw one of his shirts away".<sup>51</sup> With neither impedimenta nor family connections he arrived in the city, ostensibly to seek a larger field for the exercise of his legal talents, but with a strong desire to explore the treasures of the libraries and museums.

<sup>45</sup>Haslewood, *Op. cit.* p. 4.

<sup>46</sup>*Encyc. Brit.*, art. "Ritson".

<sup>47</sup>Nicolas, *Op. cit.* p. x.

<sup>48</sup>Ritson to Allan, *Lit. Anec.*, VIII, p. 350, note.

<sup>49</sup>MS. Douce d. i. Bodleian.

<sup>50</sup>Ritson to Allan, *Letters*, I, p. 1.

<sup>51</sup>Mrs. Kirby's comment, cited by Selby. See Appendix A.

## CHAPTER II

### LONDON LIFE; BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL CAREER

Takes clerkship with Masterman and Lloyd—Sets up for himself as conveyancer—Engages permanent chambers in Gray's Inn—Considers return to Stockton—Accepts crown appointment as High Bailiff—Becomes law student—Receives call to the bar—Practises in chambers—Stands for Durham circuit—Attitude toward profession—Legal publications: *Digest of the Court Leet*, *Jurisdiction of the Court Leet*, *Office of Constable*, *Observations on a Deed*, *Office of Bailiff*, Unpublished MSS.—Manages sister's affairs—Directs nephew's career—Method of handling money—Misunderstanding with Rowntree—Trouble with property—Disastrous speculations—Business creed and professional ethics.

Ritson went up to London as a young man interested in the law and concerned with securing an opportunity to use and develop his abilities in gaining a livelihood and obtaining advancement in his profession. To the men with whom he was most intimately associated there, he appeared as a man of eccentric habits, with a thorough knowledge of his branch of the law, with the usual interest in business and politics, and with an unusual interest in literary antiquities. His biographers have discoursed at greater or less length on his literary activities, but they have said next to nothing about the other interests of his life. He was by profession a conveyancer, not a literary antiquary; and his ostensible business was with charters and deeds, not with ancient poetry and romances. Although he came to consider literary interests of first importance, his pursuit of them was made possible only by careful attention to the law.

Very soon after his arrival in London Ritson was engaged as clerk in the conveyancing department of Masterman and Lloyd, attorneys of Gray's Inn. He settled in chambers with a man by the name of Robinson<sup>1</sup> and began his London apprenticeship of nearly five years on an annual salary of £150. There is every reason to believe that this period of service was equally satisfactory to himself and his employers. By studious attention to duties he widened his knowledge of conveyancing, secured a limited personal acquaintance among frequenters of the Inns of Court, and gained the confidence which enabled him to open

<sup>1</sup>The similarity of names suggests the question of whether Robinson of Stockton, the employer of his father and mother, had anything to do with securing Ritson's position in London.

an office of his own. Masterman, who was a member of Parliament, took an especial interest in him and aided him in a pecuniary way by allowing him the use of chambers at reduced rates, furnishing him with government franks for his correspondence, and loaning him small sums at need. This benevolence continued even after Ritson had left his first position, and he always referred to Masterman with expressions of gratitude and esteem.<sup>2</sup>

After a service of more than four years with Masterman and Lloyd, Ritson determined to set up for himself as a Conveyancer, or Special Pleader.<sup>3</sup> Late in 1780 he accordingly removed to No. 8 Holborn Court, Gray's Inn,<sup>4</sup> where he occupied chambers uninterruptedly till his death. Having severed his connection with his old masters, Ritson began his professional career without the prestige of either name or wealth. He had thoroughly mastered the details of conveyancing, but his acquaintance in London was not extensive and his clients were necessarily drawn from a limited circle. His salary no longer available, he was thrown entirely upon his own resources and at times almost despaired of being able to make his own way in the metropolis. During these anxious months when every day was a drain on his small saving and brought

<sup>2</sup>The following amusing reference to Masterman is from Ritson's versified letter to Hoar (*Letters*, I, p. 120):

My old friend Masterman is gone,  
And now the chambers are my own:  
Not gratis—that you must not think,  
For, though I did not down the chink,  
A bargain still a bargain is,  
And I did for them pay, I wis.

He left me nothing but a ring,  
Nor did I look for any thing,  
Knowing his mind not that way tended:  
Though some are mightily offended;  
And I, who ow'd a hundred pound,  
Could wish he had released the bond.

<sup>3</sup>"When I am a little more settled (having left Mr. Lloyd, and begun a little *drawing business* for myself) . . ." Ritson to Allan, Nov. 24, 1790, in *Lit. Anec.* VIII, p. 133. This would indicate that the change was a very recent one. There is nothing to bear out the suggestion of Nicolas, *Op. cit.*, p. xvi, that Ritson set up for himself *before* 1780.

<sup>4</sup>Holborn Court is now known as South Square. No. 8 has been rebuilt and is at present occupied by the library and offices.

little in the way of income, his thoughts reverted to Stockton, and he considered the advisability of returning there to practise where he was well known. He even went so far as to make inquiries of his friend Matthew Wadeson, who seems not to have encouraged his coming because the conveyancing business was well taken care of by the long-established office of one John Reed. But with perseverance and conscientious application his period of probation was not long. Shortly the times began to mend and within two years he felt that his prospects in London were so good that he could ill afford to abandon what he had so hardly gained and begin anew in a different location. When Reed died, in 1782, Wadeson immediately wrote to Ritson and suggested that if he was still desirous of settling in Stockton, a favorable opportunity now offered. Ritson advised his young friend, Jack Rowntree, a former apprentice to Reed, to take the place, and wrote to Wadeson:

"I well know that your friendship and good wishes prompted you to think of me and my former inquiries. But times and circumstances are so much changed since I made them, that it is impossible for me, now, to think of altering my situation, as Rowntree is every way qualified to prevent Mr. Reed's loss, as a professional man, from being felt by his clients and the public: and I doubt not that the prospect, which is certainly most flattering, will every day become more satisfactory and interesting."<sup>5</sup>

This, of course, does not mean that Ritson had become suddenly rich, or even that he was beyond the pinch of poverty, but simply that he had reached the point where he could securely look forward to an increasing business that would eventually render him independent. Aside from pecuniary considerations there was another factor that undoubtedly weighed heavily in his decision to remain at London. By this time he had been reading for half a decade in the British Museum and Bodleian Libraries and was so deeply interested in antiquarian research that only the most unfavorable combination of circumstances could have induced him to retire into the country where he would have no opportunity of continuing this study.

After two years more of struggle for recognition and a competence, Ritson achieved the goal of many a young English professional man—an office under the crown. Through the generous exertions of his friend and former employer, Masterman, he was on May 1, 1784, appointed High Bailiff of the Liberty of the Savoy. His chief concern was that the appointment should be made permanent, and this hope was fulfilled on January 25, 1786, when he was granted the patent of the office for

<sup>5</sup>*Letters*, I, p. 52.



life. This place he hoped would bring him in about one hundred and fifty pounds a year, but he seems actually to have realized less than one hundred pounds from it.<sup>6</sup> Even though the salary did not prove to be what he had expected, the position afforded a new lease of life to Ritson. Once more he was assured of a definite annual income. This removed the uncertainty as to his means of livelihood and, because the duties of the office were not onerous, afforded him an opportunity to devote more time to his literary studies, then grown to quite considerable proportions.

Although pleased with his appointment as Bailiff, Ritson did not exaggerate its importance and replied to the felicitations of friends that he considered it "far too poor a subject for congratulation". He was, however, seriously impressed with the responsibilities of the office. He soon discovered that to perform its duties well required a more extensive legal knowledge than he possessed, and his determination to do thoroughly everything he undertook caused him to resolve to be called to the bar. Accordingly he was admitted to Gray's Inn as a student, May 6, 1784, at the beginning of the Easter term.<sup>7</sup> Having kept the usual term of five years as a student, and having satisfied the requirements of the Benchers, he was called to the bar, May 20, 1789. He must, therefore have taken the customary oaths of Allegiance and Supremacy, in spite of their seeming conflict with the anti-religious views which he probably held then and unblushingly proclaimed later in life.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond this stage Ritson did not advance in his profession. He was never raised to the degree of Bencher, and he did not practise in open court. His failure to achieve preferment in his own Inn was in large measure the result of his peculiar notions and his eccentric habits of life. Persistence in the vegetarian diet begun at Stockton, an extremely economical mode of living, both as to food and dress, and an increasing emphasis on revolutionary ideas in politics and religion served to mark him off from his fellows. These peculiarities, coupled with increasing constitutional ailments, made him seclusive and uncommunicative. Just as he avoided his playmates at school, so as a man he had few intimates. He confessed to only a limited acquaintance among the law firms of London.<sup>9</sup> The Benchers of his Inn he considered "a parcel of fool's",

<sup>6</sup>"I possess a place which brings me in from fifty to one hundred a year." *Ibid.*, II, p.43.

<sup>7</sup>The entry in the records of Gray's Inn on this occasion is: "Joseph Ritson, son of Joseph R. of Stockton, Durham, gent." The only other time Ritson's name appears in the records is where it occurs once in the formal record of a lease.

<sup>8</sup>See Chapter VIII and Appendices A and B.

<sup>9</sup>*Letters*, I, p. 160.

and he scarcely knew the men who lived nearest to him. Robert Smith says:

"Mr. Ritson lived in the same staircase with me in Gray's Inn for many years, and the common civilities of the day passed between us, but nothing more—we never visited."<sup>10</sup>

As a natural corollary to these traits of character, Ritson limited his practice as Conveyancer and Consulting Barrister to chambers. As Barrister-at-law he had the privilege of practising before the superior courts of the land, but only once, and that five years after his admission to the bar, is he known to have appeared in court wearing his professional costume, and then he was merely a spectator, not an advocate. This was on the occasion of Horne Tooke's trial for high treason. When Ritson found that speculators were selling seats in the court room at a guinea each, he shyly donned his wig and gown and secured free entrance.<sup>11</sup>

Two other factors operated to retard Ritson's advancement in the profession. The first was his antagonism to the government in all matters of politics. In the preface to a little volume of *Tables shewing the Descent of the Crown of England*, which he printed privately in 1778 because he said he "never dared to publish it", he declared himself a Jacobite and set forth his political beliefs in extremely vigorous language.<sup>12</sup> But despite his decided opinions he manifested only a passing interest in politics, and when he expressed himself it was usually to condemn the government. Periods of upheaval and popular excitement stimulated him to comment but not to action. Of the popular disturbances in London in June, 1780, he was an interested spectator though in no way a participant. His ardent expression of sympathy with the purposes of the Protestant Society and his condemnation of the "scoundrel ministry" foreshadow the revolutionary ardor which later fired him.<sup>13</sup> When the much maligned War Ministry resigned in 1782, Ritson referred to the event as,

"the dismissal of those miscreant blockheads who formed the late infamous administration, some of whom it is to be hoped will yet hop headless".<sup>14</sup>

Aside from these instances there is no hint of Ritson's interest in political

<sup>10</sup>See Appendix A.

<sup>11</sup>*Letters*, II, p. 57.

<sup>12</sup>Haslewood, *Op. Cit.*, p. 8. *The Descent of the Crown* is discussed in the following chapter.

<sup>13</sup>*Letters*, I, pp. 13-17. See also Robert Bisset, *The History of the Reign of George III*, 2nd edition, London, 1820, Vol. III, p. 21 ff.

<sup>14</sup>*Letters*, I, p. 44.

events in London during the early years of his residence there. He seemed to be much more concerned with legal and political conditions in the region of Stockton than in his immediate environs. Coupled with his revolutionary tendencies this endeavor to follow closely and even to help direct the politics of the North while he practised his profession in London was sufficiently distracting to prevent high success in either direction. Not only did he take a keen interest and occasionally a personal share in the various elections at Stockton, but on one occasion he yielded to the entreaties of friends to stand for the Durham circuit. He went into the North for the campaign but was defeated in the election and professed no reluctance at losing the position.<sup>15</sup>

The second factor was his increasing interest in literature. His preference for the study of poetical antiquities was so marked that he constantly assumed a sneering attitude toward the law. He had a great contempt for the profession in general and for attorneys in particular. The law he treated as a mere bread-and-butter profession and feelingly expressed his desire to do what he knew was impossible under the circumstances—to relinquish it altogether. His crown appointment he spoke of as “that little dirty place in the Savoy”, and yet he was forced to hold on to it as the only assured source of regular income. He never lost an opportunity to swinge the attorneys, and his remarks run the gamut from humorous jibes to serious charges of dishonesty. With satiric facetiousness he thus congratulates Rowntree on his progress in the profession :

“I hear with pleasure the increase of your business. To establish yourself at Stockton you have nothing to do but, by dint of evidence, &c, to gain a desperate cause or two, ruin two or three honest, and hang two or three innocent men, and your fortune is made.”<sup>16</sup>

Again he writes :

“Apropos; have you got a sufficient number of *credible witnesses*? There are a few devilish good hands in that line hereabouts, which I fancy you might have pretty reasonable. N. B. I assure you I have no interest in this proposal myself, as I belong to a quite different gang.”<sup>17</sup>

To his nephew, who is thinking of becoming one, he describes attorneys as,

“not only the most ignorant and capricious, but the most insincere, unprincipled, and in every respect, worthless of men,”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, I, pp. 171, 197, and *passim*.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 72.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 80.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, II, p. 23.

and then threatens him with absolute worthlessness if he does not immediately study to be an attorney.

There may be a measure of personal animus back of these violent outbursts, but there is something more. They are the genuine expression of Ritson's sincere beliefs. Not only did he feel that attorneys were, as a class, dishonest, but that they were useless parasites upon society. He would do away with the existing need for them by going back to elemental principles. The innocent man, he declared, needs no defense at the bar of justice; the guilty man deserves none. Ergo, justice will be done without the expense of attorneys. However absurd such a theory may appear, it was nevertheless sincere. Ritson exemplified his beliefs in his own conduct. He never willingly allowed himself to be referred to as an attorney,<sup>19</sup> but considered the epithet opprobrious. To Rowntree he once declared vehemently, "I would not act the part of attorney for you nor any man."<sup>20</sup> On another occasion he wrote:

"You need not have been under the least apprehension of my addressing you by so odious a title as Attorney-at-law . . . . You are just beginning to value a childish distinction which I have learned to be ashamed of."<sup>21</sup>

But with all his sneering and contemptuousness Ritson yet had a real, though perhaps a forced, interest in the law. He was conscientious enough to endeavor to do well whatever he undertook, whether he liked it or not. Consequently he applied himself assiduously to the study of his profession, especially during his early years in London. When he received the appointment as High Bailiff of the Savoy, he redoubled his energy with the result that he not only was admitted to the bar but also published three volumes dealing with his office. The natural antiquarian tendency of his interests gave an unmistakable character both to the legal compilations which he published and to the manuscripts which he prepared but did not put to press.

In the same year with his call to the bar, 1789, Ritson brought out the first<sup>22</sup> of his publications on subjects connected with his profession.

<sup>19</sup>Ritson was, strictly speaking, a barrister, not an attorney, and he protested against the tendency of his day to slur over the distinction. As a barrister he limited his practice to conveyancing, a branch of the law which, however dry and uninteresting it may appear to the average individual, is exempt from the criticisms which he levelled against attorneys.

<sup>20</sup>*Letters*, I, p. 80.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 173.

<sup>22</sup>In the list of Ritson's works in S. A. Allibone's *Critical Dictionary of English Literature*, etc., Philadelphia and London, 1908, is included *The Lord High Steward of England; or an Historical Dissertation on the Origin, Antiquity, and Functions of that Officer. . . . with Remarks on the antient and modern*

This was *A Digest of the Proceedings of the Court Leet of the Manor and Liberty of Savoy, parcel of the Duchy of Lancaster, in the county of Middlesex: from the year 1682 to the present time*. This is the first of two publications on the Court Leet. It is the natural product of five years of study since his appointment as High Bailiff of the Savoy and is a minute record of the thoroughness with which he delved into the antiquities of the office. His interest in the Court Leet is otherwise symptomatic. The most ancient court in the land, originating in the early feudal days and for ages the most authoritative court of record in existence, it had sunk, by the end of the eighteenth century, to the place of least authority and was ultimately entirely superseded by the modern courts of the justices. Only an antiquarian would find pleasure in delving into the ancient records of an institution whose glory was already faded and whose usefulness was practically negligible.

In 1791 appeared *The Jurisdiction of the Court Leet: Exemplified in the Articles which the Jury or Inquest for the King, In that Court, is Charged and Sworn, and by Law Enjoined to Inquire of and Present*.

*Modes of trying Peers. . . . To which is added, A Catalogue of the High Stewards of England. . . . London, 1776*. There are plausible reasons for concluding this to be the work of Ritson. The volume was published anonymously, as were most of Ritson's. The subject is one in which Ritson was undoubtedly interested, especially after his appointment as High Bailiff, for his superior officer was the High Steward. The general treatment of the subject is comparable to that in his acknowledged law works, consisting of a compilation of extracts from ancient authorities and citations from the statutes, with little or no authorial comment. But the following considerations seem to prove conclusively that the work is not Ritson's. 1. The "Historical Dissertation" begins with these sentences:

"Having been employed for some time past in an historical research, relative to some of our Norman Princes, I had occasion to inform myself of the nature of the great offices, which were hereditary from the time of William the First. Of these, the four principal were the Steward, the Chamberlain, the Constable and the Mareschal, of England."

The *High Steward* was published in 1776, Ritson's first year in London. There is no evidence that he was interested in this subject while in Stockton. Of the "four principal offices" mentioned here, Ritson wrote on the Constable, but there is no hint in that volume that he had been previously concerned with this or allied subjects. 2. The writer of the *High Steward* makes constant use of the first personal pronoun singular. This is all but totally unknown in Ritson's publications. In the law books he refers to himself as "the compiler", "the writer", or "the editor", never as "I". 3. The *High Steward* was not included in *Law Tracts*, 1794, a volume published by Ritson with his name on the title page and including his legal publications prior to that date.

*Together with Approved Precedents.*<sup>23</sup> Although this was his second publication dealing with the Court Leet, it did not by any means exhaust the material he had gathered on that subject. His original purpose and the reasons for its partial fulfilment are explained in the "Advertisement":

"It was originally intended that the compiler's publication on the subject here treated of should have comprised all that, to his knowledge, had been said, or, in his judgment, could be said, upon it. Large collections were made for the purpose, and the work partially proceeded in: but the bulk of the volume and the scanty sale it was likely to experience effectually discouraged him from proceeding with that plan, and produced the Introduction and Analysis now presented to the public."

The "Introduction" treats of the name of the court, its antiquity, nature, and present state. It is wholly antiquarian and impersonal and affords a minute and accurate history of the subject. The "Analysis" consists of thirteen chapters, fully annotated, on the historical development of the officers and functions of the court, and a small body of precedents of presentments and judgments in Leet. The work was received with great favor among the profession as a valuable contribution to the study of legal antiquities.<sup>24</sup>

Ritson's third legal publication, and the second to appear in 1791, was *The Office of Constable: being an entirely New Compendium of the Law concerning that Ancient Minister for the conservation of the peace. Carefully compiled from the best authorities. With a Preface; and an Introduction, containing some account of the origin and antiquity of the office.*<sup>25</sup> It was prompted by "a sincere wish to benefit the community, by furnishing its most ancient, most constitutional, and most useful officer with a compendious system or manual of his duty or powers".<sup>26</sup> This work, like the preceding volumes, is a "mere epitome of the original compilation", for a pamphlet of fifty pages, at a moderate price, seemed more likely to be purchased by the constables, whom it was designed to benefit, and understood when read than a more expensive and less concise volume.

<sup>23</sup>A second edition "with great additions" was published from Ritson's annotated manuscript (Lot 978 of his library sale) in 1809, and a third in 1816.

<sup>24</sup>See *Athenaeum*, Vol. V, p. 150.

<sup>25</sup>The second edition, enlarged from Ritson's manuscript (Lot 976 of his library sale), was published in 1815. In 1794 these three volumes (*Proceedings of the Court Leet, Jurisdiction of the Court Leet, Office of Constable*) were reprinted as one, with the title, *Law Tracts, by Joseph Ritson, of Gray's Inn, Barrister.*

<sup>26</sup>*Office of Constable*, Preface, p. iii.

In the Preface Ritson takes up the cudgels in defense of the constable and in opposition to the lawmakers. With the vigorous denunciation and the sarcastic ridicule which brought him notoriety as a literary critic and antagonist he protests against the continuous making of new laws without purging the statutes of those which are obsolete and useless. There are many laws on the statute books, he declares, which are not, and many more which ought not to be, in force. In fact,

"every little dirty parish in the environs of London must have a law for itself. The churchwardens can provide the money, the attorney wants a job, the justice looks forward to the penalties, and the 'gemmen of the westry' like authority: an act of parliament is accordingly obtained and being an admirable compound of ignorance and knavery, cannot fail of proving exceedingly beneficial to the community."<sup>27</sup>

The result is that the officers of the law, especially the constables, are ignorant of their powers and duties. It was Blackstone's opinion that, considering the type of men who were elected constables, they ought to be kept in ignorance of their powers. To this view Ritson takes violent exception. He draws upon Shakespeare for a satire on the typical English constable<sup>28</sup> and then proposes a number of radical reforms which he has the perspicuity to see are too constructive and progressive to be adopted.

The Introduction and body of the work are of the same type as the volumes on the Court Leet, except that here Ritson occasionally ventures far enough away from his sources to give a personal observation in a footnote. Like its predecessors, this pamphlet is a useful, and certainly a learned and accurate compilation.

The three volumes already considered were the only legal publications to appear during Ritson's life. Yet they comprise only a small part of the material actually collected and arranged as a result of his professional interests. At least eight manuscripts were left in varying degrees of preparation and but two of these were published posthumously. Before his death Ritson had revised for publication the manuscript of *Practical Points, or, Maxims in Conveyancing*, by his old master, Ralph Bradley. When this volume was published in 1804, Ritson's thirty-four page pamphlet, *Critical Observations on the Various and Essential Parts of a Deed*, was appended to it. In this little work the deed is taken up clause by clause and elucidated. In 1811 Joseph Frank published Ritson's *Office of a Bailiff of a Liberty*, which he says was

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p. vi. Ritson is here only voicing a protest which had been made in England for many generations. See his footnotes.

<sup>28</sup>Cf. Elbow in *Measure for Measure*, Dull in *Love's Labors Lost*, and Dogberry in *Much Ado*.

compiled about the same period as the three tracts published during the author's lifetime, and which it very closely resembles in manner.

In addition to these five published volumes there were six manuscript collections of a legal nature.<sup>29</sup> It is almost certain that the chief labor on all these compilations was done before 1795, for ill health and an absorbing interest in literary affairs took the major portion of his time and attention after that date. When it is remembered that by 1795, in addition to the dozen legal works, he had actually published twenty-six volumes and fragments of three others (to say nothing of projects in hand), the mere bulk of work accomplished is astonishing. But more important than this is the thoroughness and accuracy with which all the work was done. Although Ritson's distaste for the law as a profession must have made part of the labor of compiling his legal publications mere task work, yet the fact that they are all antiquarian in nature and involve to a greater or less degree the type of work in which he took greatest interest in the realm of poetry is sufficient evidence that he did not get far afield from his vital interests.

Such is the bare skeleton of Ritson's professional career—his office, his attitude toward the law, his legal publications. But very little of the intimate personal character of the man is revealed in these. That phase of his character is to be seen in both the general and specific conduct of business affairs. It is most intimately and most favorably exhibited in the care and attention bestowed upon his sister and nephew. It shows to less advantage in his pecuniary transactions with various friends and in the misunderstandings and disagreements which not infrequently arose therefrom. It is again seen to disadvantage in the disastrous maladministration of his own property. And the unfortunate disparity between theory and practise, between ideal and accomplishment, is clear from a knowledge of his business creed and professional ethics.

Upon the death of his parents Ritson generously assumed the management of his sister's affairs. He had little inclination for the details of business and was quite frank in acknowledging his weakness in this direction.<sup>30</sup> There were certain general principles of conduct by which he was guided in all matters, but he lacked the tact to adapt them to various specific cases. As a consequence he contented himself with

<sup>29</sup>Nos. 1-6, Appendix C, II.

<sup>30</sup>Ritson's letters contain frequent mention of his business incompetence:

"However as you are a much better judge of these things [the value of a house] than I can pretend to be, I shall readily submit to your opinion"; ". . . It would be best to let the house, till at least as great a fool as myself wants to buy one"; "I wish you, who can manage everything of the nature of business, by familiar methods to which I am a total stranger, would . . ."; etc.



knowing that his sister was supplied with all the necessaries for an economical but comfortable existence and left the details to Matthew Wadeson, a resident of Stockton, in whose business sagacity he had great confidence. In this indirect manner his sister's affairs were undoubtedly more skilfully conducted than if he had attempted to manage them entirely alone.

Ritson's London business life is bound up closely with the life of his nephew, Joseph Frank, and is intimately revealed through letters to him. He undertook the entire expense of Frank's education, cared for him when he came to London to enter business, and followed his subsequent career with loving interest, being his adviser in every important step of life. We have already seen how he sent him books and materials for his Latin school days. He was so accustomed to sending useful presents that he felt it necessary to apologize when an occasion passed without its gift. Early in January, 1782, he writes:

"I am only poor at present, or I would have sent you a New Year's gift: but if you will grow wiser and better behaved than you were when I left you, I won't forget you on the approach of better times."<sup>31</sup>

Better times were slow in coming, and often in the struggle against poverty and in the business competition of the great city Ritson reflected on the wisdom of his change from Stockton to London and regretted the lack of experienced counsel in his youth. As a consequence he sought constantly to give his nephew the advice which he knew from experience would be helpful to a young man in his situation. At an early age both Frank and his mother became anxious for him to "get into business" and importuned Ritson's aid in placing him advantageously. Feeling that it would be unwise for the lad to curtail his education in order to enter professional life, Ritson wrote to his sister:

"I think Joe had better go to school another year, and we shall then determine what to make of him. He will be only fifteen, and you know I was much more before I went to business."<sup>32</sup>

He gave the same counsel to his nephew:

"I must beg leave to say . . . that it will be much better for you to mind your book, than to come to London. You will see it soon enough in all likelihood though you will have little reason to lament if you never see it at all."<sup>33</sup>

But they were insistent, and in the winter, more to relieve the anxiety of the mother than to satisfy the boy's whim, Ritson promised to take

<sup>31</sup>*Letters*, I, p. 40.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 90.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 91.

Frank to London the next summer to live with him and study for his profession. Something of Ritson's habits of life may be gleaned from his advice to his nephew to spend the last days at home in learning to cook, sew on buttons, and mend stockings. The only explanation he offered the astonished youth was this:

"You will think, perhaps, that such a lesson would be more fit for one who was coming into a Cook's shop, than a Conveyancer's chambers—but when you have been here a year or two you will probably be of a different opinion."<sup>34</sup>

In the summer of 1785 Frank went into chambers with his uncle in order to learn conveyancing and at the same time be under the immediate care of his guardian. After a period of five years or more he returned to the vicinity of Stockton to enter upon business for himself. It was at this time that, like Ritson before him, he felt the need of further legal training, and asked his uncle's advice on the question of studying for the bar. Ritson's reply is curious. There is something in it of the eccentricity which marked his views on politics, religion, and literature. He sneers at his office, berates and maligns attorneys, and at the same time vigorously urges his nephew to become an attorney and perhaps seek an office like his own. He writes:

"Wolley's reflection on your proposal of drawing under the bar is certainly just: 'I have experience of it myself': and can assure you that if it had not been for that little dirty place in the Savoy, I should most probably at this moment have been either in a jail, an attorney's office, or stationer's shop: and it would be hard to say which of these situations is the worst. Five years are nothing in competition with the prospect you will have of establishing yourself in a useful and lucrative business at the end of the term: whereas you might be drudging whether under or above the bar for ten times that long, without a hope of ever being worth a farthing. . . . In a word you had much better hang yourself at once than begin to draw under the bar. If you do not immediately accept Wolley's offer [to study for the bar] you may resign yourself to everlasting damnation, as there will not be a chance left for your doing well."<sup>35</sup>

Ritson believed in and insisted upon thorough preparation for every task. This was one of the constantly recurring points in his literary criticism, and he placed equal emphasis upon it in business. When Frank determined to follow the advice of his friends, he did not wish to spend the full five years in terms; so he submitted to his uncle his plans for "saving two years". Ritson, satisfied that there was no royal road to the bar, addressed him thus:

"The ingenious expedient by which you intend to save two years is perfectly

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 104.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, II, p. 22.

well calculated to lose five. In a word, your time would be thrown away, and yourself (most probably) put in the pillory. Nothing will do short of actual service for five complete years under articles."<sup>36</sup>

Even after Frank had entered upon his service with Wolley, Ritson kept a watchful eye on him. The young man had interests of his own aside from legal study, and spent much time and thought on them. Ritson had no respect for the man who used his employer's time to further his own private ends, however laudable they might be in themselves. Just as he had no sympathy with sinecurism in any form, so was he outspoken against the individual who would not gain a livelihood by honest labor. There were two points upon which he placed great emphasis and which he constantly reiterated to Frank: give your employers full satisfaction; acquire a competency. In the following extract they are expressed with characteristic precision:

"After all, I would recommend it to you, as a friend, to lay your politics and philosophy upon the shelf, for a few years at least; their temporary absence will do you no harm, and their perpetual presence can do you no good. Your first and principal (if not sole) object should be, by a sedulous and unremitting attention to business, to do justice to your employers and acquire the means of an honest independency."<sup>37</sup>

Ritson was very anxious that Frank should avoid the pitfalls into which he himself had unwittingly stumbled. He frequently confessed his own faults in order the better to impress his advice upon his nephew. He realized that he was eccentric, that his peculiarities of diet, of belief, of manner, hindered his progress. But while he recognized the handicap under which his eccentricities placed him, he seemed utterly impotent to escape from it. There is remarkable self-revelation in this admonition:

"You must be content, for the present, to lay most of your peculiarities upon the shelf: you make a *g* like a *p* which is abominable. Avoid as much as possible all appearance of singularity or affectation, and while you are a man of business endeavor to be nothing else: I have learned the value of this piece of advice by dear-bought experience; and experience generally both costs too much and comes too late to be of service to the purchaser."<sup>38</sup>

With Frank and with other friends, especially Rowntree and Wadson, Ritson frequently exchanged opinions on matters of professional interest. Being in London he was often asked by his provincial correspondents to look up references or to cite the law in cases in which they

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, II, p. 25.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, II, p. 40.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, II, p. 167.

were interested. These errands he was always willing to do, but his liberality was imposed upon, and he was often asked to perform for nothing services for which his friends were paid when the results of his labors were given to their clients. Ritson himself never hesitated to ask for assistance in his various undertakings, but he always offered and expected to pay for it, either in cash or in kind. While he seldom displayed sufficient resoluteness of spirit to refuse a favor to a friend, he occasionally remonstrated against unfair requests. Rowntree was the most frequent object of his sarcasm. At one time he wrote:

"I shall make you the usual charge for the deeds and surrender, as I take your client to be like yourself—a very honest man—who could not wish that any person should give up his time and trouble for nothing. That is not your plan, Master? No, no. You'll take care to do very well for yourself, I dare say, whatever you do for your clients."<sup>39</sup>

Ritson's utter lack of business ability is shown in his woeful inconsistency in pecuniary transactions. In handling another's money he was scrupulously exact and careful in the smallest detail. Even though his record of accounts was purely mental, he paid to it that attention requisite to insure full justice to his client, and if he erred, it was always on the side of generosity. Besides controlling his nephew's annuity, he frequently had the task of administering book funds for his friends. However incompetent he may have been in other business transactions, he knew the value of an ancient volume and prided himself on his ability to drive a bargain with the booksellers.

But when the money was his own, Ritson was careless to the point of indifference and generous to the point of recklessness. If there was a purchase to be made, he did not know how much should be paid; if he had something to sell, he depended upon the judgment of friends as to its value. This placed him at the mercy of less scrupulous men, who not infrequently took advantage of him in business transactions. Though he occasionally realized that he was being cheated, he seldom did more than enter some such mild protest as this:

"It ran in my mind that I was to pay you forty pounds *for the whole kitty*: if, however, as I collect from your letter, the sum was ten pounds more, I can only say that I have brewed a pretty kettle of fish, and brought my hogs to a fair market. As writing seems to be attended with some difficulty if not uneasiness, you have only to put down a figure of 4 or 5 before a cypher to satisfy me of the verity of the matter: a nod, you know, is as good as a wink to a blind horse."<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 114.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, II, p. 10.

The difficulty was that Ritson paid too much attention to what he owed others, and others too little attention to what they owed him. And because he knew more about his debts to others than their obligations to him, he never possessed a clear notion of his pecuniary status. He was continually calling upon his friends for statements of account that he might know where he stood. In 1794 he sent this pathetic appeal to Wadeson:

"I am not poorer than I used to be, but my money, as they say, is neither here nor there. Besides, I want to put my little affairs in order that I may live, if I am to live, or at least die, in comfort."<sup>41</sup>

He frequently resolved to be systematic in his business affairs, but the resolve never became more than a good intention. He wrote to Rowntree:

"I mean in future to pay more attention to the arrangement of my pecuniary matters than I have hitherto done. With half your economy I might at this moment have had a thousand pounds in the funds."<sup>42</sup>

Such loose methods led inevitably to difficulties, and he quarreled over money matters with old friends, with publishers, and with booksellers. Money was a very inconstant factor in Ritson's life. Aside from his small salary, he had as income only the proceeds from a limited business and the occasional small royalty from a book. His living expenses were almost negligible, but he spent large sums for books for his library, laid out considerable amounts in printing his own volumes, made clandestine "loans" to needy relatives,<sup>43</sup> and obliged impecunious friends until he was almost constantly in want. When he had money he loaned it to any one who asked for it, and expected, in his turn, to be able to borrow as easily when in need. That his creditors failed to meet their obligations and that his friends occasionally refused to respond to his appeals were matters of surprise to no one but himself. The greater caution exercised by others he sometimes misconstrued as antagonism to his interests. He was almost constantly in a state of ill health and used to plead his bodily infirmities as an excuse for his business laxity. Nevertheless he was frequently involved in disagreeable altercations with his most intimate friends, some of which led to serious results. The outstanding example is his misunderstanding with Rowntree, a life-long friend with whom he had borrowed and loaned promiscuously for many years and to whom he once said:

"My good sir, I have hitherto had no account to keep with you and whether

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, II, p. 61.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 157.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, II, p. 244.

I keep one or not—that is a subject upon which I dare venture to say no dispute will ever happen between you and me.”<sup>44</sup>

But the dispute came and with it the disruption of a long friendship and the almost total severance of close connections with Stockton.

Early in 1791 Ritson asked Rowntree for the loan of one hundred pounds, and receiving no answer construed the silence as a dislike on his friend’s part to accommodate him. When Rowntree explained his failure to reply as due to other causes, Ritson apologized for the false interpretation he had given it. His apprehensions he describes as,

“false appearances which a gloomy fretfulness in my disposition magnified into clouds that threatened the sun of your friendship with utter darkness, though the sky being now cleared, I find it to burn as bright as ever.”<sup>45</sup>

But this did not satisfy Rowntree, who played the rôle of “injured innocence” and represented himself as deeply wounded by Ritson’s lapse of faith. To this one-sided view of the matter Ritson eloquently replied:

“You will do great injustice to my feelings to suppose that all the uneasiness experienced upon this disagreeable occasion has been confined to yourself. My mind and spirits have sustained a shock of which it will not be easy for me to get the better. I am arrived at a time of life when the interruption of a much shorter acquaintance than ours is more to be dreaded than any friendship is to be courted: and the confidence that nothing of this kind would ever take place between us has rendered the disappointment inexpressibly severe. What can I say? I shall endeavor to forget everything that has passed, and to regain the favorable opinion I entertained of your friendship on the 31st of December, 1790. I am not fond of professions and have long ceased to express myself with either advantage or ease. But the intimacy of a dozen years must, I am persuaded, have convinced you of the esteem and sincerity with which I have been your truly faithful and affectionate friend.”<sup>46</sup>

Again Rowntree refused to accept Ritson’s statements at their face value and seemed secretly desirous of terminating the friendship. They continued an intermittent correspondence, but Ritson’s letters are more formal and more distant, though as sincere and straightforward as of old. Writing to Wadeson some months later he dismissed the incident, and gave a characteristic interpretation of Rowntree’s position.

“You, my good friend, are a man of feeling: as to my part, it is no longer in the power of Elegy to make me cry, or (which I think much more lamentable) of Epigram to make me laugh. I should, however, without consulting Mr. Shen-

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 158.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 183.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 200.

stone, be very unhappy to lose the friendship of a man I esteemed; but when esteem is once destroyed, what is the value of either the friendship or the man? Rowntree, to be sure, is a very clever as well as a very useful fellow, and was not, perhaps, to blame that I placed more confidence in his sincerity than it was able to bear. One should have some sort of a mental thermometer to ascertain the boiling and freezing points of a man's friendship. At least (to change my metaphor) it would be very important to know 'the sticking place' of the machine, lest by screwing too high you break it in pieces, or render it of no further use. My friend Rowntree's zeal might be up to the loan of fifty, or perhaps sixty, or even seventy pounds, but the mention of a hundred extinguished his fires and converted his hot water into cold ice. I am, therefore content to let him freeze."<sup>47</sup>

In addition to the question of borrowing and lending money, there was another business matter which harassed Ritson greatly; this was his property. From an uncle he inherited "two or three small old houses" at Hartlepool and a little property in Great Strickland. During his early years in London he sold his small paternal inheritance in Stockton and purchased at auction a large house there. He seems to have been unfortunate in the character of his tenants for all these houses and was under the additional handicap of being so far removed from them as to be unable to give them any personal attention. At different times Rowntree, Wadson, and Ralph Hoar, all Stockton friends, acted as his agent, but none of them was successful in collecting rents. At first Ritson took their failure good-naturedly and made facetious reference to his "hopeful tenants" and to the stewardship of his agent:

"My Hartlepool estate, I fancy, is sunk into the earth, or the houses are empty, or the tenant insolvent. Render up an account of thy stewardship, thou—just steward."<sup>48</sup>

But his attitude soon changed. The constant trouble which the property gave and the urgent need for money in London caused him to resolve upon selling everything. But in executing this wish his agents were no more successful than in gathering rentals. Failing to dispose of the property for what he had been led to believe it was worth and being involved more and more in pecuniary straits, he finally in desperation commissioned his agents to sell "for anything that can be got". But even this blanket charge was not effective. The property was never sold, but it was finally swept from him.

Incompetent as he was in handling money, Ritson occasionally dabbled in the Stock Exchange whenever his funds for the moment permitted it. He always depended on the advice of friends, and he nearly

<sup>47</sup>*ibid.*, I, p. 211.

<sup>48</sup>*ibid.*, I, p. 65.

always made bad investments. His earliest recorded venture on 'Change is thus explained in a letter to Harrison:

"As you allowed me to suit my convenience with regard to the payment of your draught, I shall take the liberty to defer it till I leave town, having turned stock-jobber and disabled myself by buying into the funds. I shall be a loser of ten pounds by this business; so that you must never say I bargain like a tradesman."<sup>49</sup>

His last move was totally disastrous. A friend in whom he had great confidence induced him "in hope and flattery, to speculate with all the money I had or was able to get". As a consequence of the mismanagement of his friend combined with the sudden peace which terminated the French-English difficulties in 1803, he was utterly ruined, his loss being "considerably above one thousand pounds". All his property and a part of his library went to satisfy his creditors, and then he began borrowing money for another investment in which he hoped to retrieve his losses "when the price of consols fall to nothing in consequence of the expected French invasion"<sup>50</sup>.

As a business man Ritson exhibited the proverbial inability of genius to meet the practical requirements of a work-a-day world. But with all his imperfections he was a man of high principles and good intentions. His business creed, as expounded in suggestions to his nephew, is one of sound integrity. He lacked tact, however, in executing it and too frequently exceeded or fell short of the requirements of the case. His code of professional ethics was just as uncompromising. He not only believed that the guilty man should have no hired defense at the bar of justice, but he felt that no honest man would go to court with an unjust cause. He remarked on one occasion:

"I do not think that man honest who would avail himself of a quirk of law to obtain what in reason and justice he can possibly have no right to."<sup>51</sup>

Thus far many men of his own profession would agree with him, at least in theory. Ritson did not stop here; he had the courage of his convictions. In all his professional and business dealings he was guided by one principle—that of honesty. His opinions once formed, nothing could

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, II, p. 18. Nicolas commends Ritson for "his avowed detestation of every species of gambling." (Op. Cit., p. lxi) But he does not seem to have been so circumspect in action as this praise would lead one to suppose him.

<sup>50</sup>*Letters*, II, p. 246. This investment was fortunately never made. As it was, more than £500, in addition to his books, was required to liquidate Ritson's indebtedness.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 71.



induce him to act contrary to his convictions. He was always willing to hear arguments in favor of a different line of conduct, but these he invariably referred back to his touchstone of honesty, where, if they failed in the test, they were rejected.

The absurd lengths to which he went in pursuance of his policy are illustrated in the following anecdotes related by Surtees.

"He chose to exercise his judgment and his sturdy morality on questions which a less scrupulous lawyer would have left to his client to settle with his own conscience. For instance, having made up his mind that the Duke of Athol had already been sufficiently remunerated for ceding his rights in the Isle of Man, he refused all the solicitations of his friend, Frances Russel, Esq., Solicitor to the Board of Control, to induce him to draw the draft of a petition to Parliament, for the further recompense which the Duke afterwards received. The argument, 'if you do not, another will', had no effect on Ritson, nor would he ever set cheerily to work, without being perfectly satisfied of the strict propriety of the business in which he was engaged. As a somewhat ludicrous instance, he steadily refused to draw the draft of Jonas Hanway's Bill for the Incorporation of the Chimney-Sweepers."<sup>52</sup>

But Ritson's influence was not wholly negative in this regard. At least one instance is reported of his having successfully exerted himself to drive out of office a man who openly defied the law. As High Bailiff of the Savoy Ritson was associated with Reeves, the notorious leader of the association for encouragement of spies and informers, and for the suppression of freedom of writing and speaking upon political topics. Although Reeves was High Steward of the Savoy, and as such his superior officer, Ritson lost no opportunity to discredit him because of his political conduct. When Reeves resigned his position, it was Ritson's belief that he, by his continued hostility, had driven his superior from office.<sup>53</sup>

But with all his peculiarities of habit and opinion and in spite of his contempt for the law, Ritson met with more than mediocre success in the profession. Had he devoted himself unreservedly to it, his talents, his inflexible integrity, and his high professional character must have led to wealth and renown. His few law tracts give him a worthy place among the respected illustrators of legal antiquities; more attention to work of this sort would have been deeply appreciated by a relatively small but select group of his colleagues. He was content, however, to use the law as a means to other ends, and to draw his business from such clients as came to him unsolicited. A small circle of friends furnished

<sup>52</sup>Robert Surtees, *The History and Antiquities of the County Palatine of Durham*, London, 1816-40. Vol. III, p. 193, note i.

<sup>53</sup>See "Memoir of Ritson" in *Monthly Magazine*, Nov., 1803.

sufficient work to enable him to eke out a moderate private income, and to devote the bulk of his time to studies more congenial to his taste.

Sir Walter Scott is reported to have said of Ritson :

"he had an honesty of principle about him, which, if it went to ridiculous extremes, was still respectable from the soundness of the foundation. I don't believe the world could have made Ritson say the thing he did not think."<sup>54</sup>

The fundamental identity of Ritson the professional man with Ritson the critic of letters is apparent when it is recognized that Scott's statement, made with the literary antiquarian in mind, applies with equal force to the Barrister-at-law.

<sup>54</sup>Robert Chambers, *The Book of Days*, London, 1869. Vol. II, p. 406.

## CHAPTER III

### LITERARY BEGINNINGS; THE WARTON CONTROVERSY

Reads in British Museum Library—Collects material for Allan—Goes to Oxford—Contributes to Gough's *British Topography*—Visits Combridge—Meets Farmer—Has part in the revival of interest in antiquarianism—Publishes *Descent of the Crown*—Prepares a number of manuscripts of local antiquarian interest—Turns to literature—Williams's *Odes*—*The Stockton Jubilee*—Prospectus of *Fabularum Romanensium Bibliotheca*—*Observations on the History of English Poetry*—Its nature—Critical reception—Effect upon Warton—Ritson's later attitude toward Warton—General estimate.

Ritson's first concern on arriving in London was undoubtedly to secure a place in a law firm where he might have a definite if meagre income and an opportunity to exercise his legal talents. This practical consideration disposed of to his satisfaction, his attention almost immediately turned to seek the means of satisfying his interest in literature and various antiquities. In this he relied upon the friendship of his Stockton acquaintance, George Allan, the famous antiquary. Shortly after his arrival in town he was introduced to the British Museum by Allan<sup>1</sup> and was soon recognized as an habitual visitor there. During the hours that could be spared from his legal duties in the office of Masterman and Lloyd he was usually to be found in the Museum poring over ancient documents and literary manuscripts then but little explored. He seems to have limited his recreation to the daily walk to and from the Museum, and this routine was varied so little that the slight figure clad in customary black hurrying along with uncertain gait soon became a familiar sight to frequenters of his line of travel.<sup>2</sup> This brief daily walk with an occasional vacation ramble into the country comprised his relaxation through life. His habits were formed early and rigidly adhered to.

Before he left Stockton Ritson's interest in local antiquities was effectually aroused, and he began a collection of curious papers regarding his native town. In this project he was encouraged and materially aided by Allan, whose kindness and generosity he was anxious to repay.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>See note by Allan's son in *Lit. Anec.*, VIII, p. 350.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Surtees, *Op. Cit.*, III. p. 195.

<sup>3</sup>See letter of Ritson to Allan, dated "Stockton, April 19, 1775", in *Lit. Anec.*, VIII. p. 350, note.

The opportunity to be of service to his friend came when he obtained access to the antiquarian stores in the British Museum. The earliest of Ritson's collected letters, written August 26, 1776, reveals him as already familiar with the antiquarian manuscripts of the Museum and as concerned chiefly with finding material relating to the ancient history of the county of Durham. The bits of information which he presented to Allan in this first letter and which he subsequently supplemented quite materially, were to be used by Allan in a *History of Durham* on which he was then engaged but which he later relinquished in favor of his friend William Hutchinson.<sup>4</sup>

Among the manuscripts, mentioned in this early letter, in which Ritson was searching for material concerning Durham, he speaks of the "ancient exemplar of the *Boldon Buke*" in the Bodleian Library, which "may contain perhaps many other articles equally valuable" but which he had not yet had an opportunity of consulting. An impelling desire to enlarge his acquaintance with antiquarian sources and a curiosity as to what was to be discovered about his native shire led him to visit the Bodleian and other libraries at Oxford as soon as opportunity presented. Toward the latter end of his vacation in 1779 he made a pedestrian excursion to Oxford<sup>5</sup> and spent some time in the various libraries, where his success, he says, "though not altogether equal to my expectations was pretty reasonable".<sup>6</sup> Besides the notes from the Boldon Book, of which he had already spoken, Ritson sent Allan copies of charters and registers concerning Durham and mentioned others which would be of great service "not only in stating the history of property, but in forming and correcting the descents of ancient families."<sup>7</sup> On this same visit he extracted from the original register of

<sup>4</sup>Nicolas erroneously states (Op. Cit., p. xi) that this first letter "exhibits Ritson as . . . aiding Mr. Allan in collecting materials for a *History of Sherburn Hospital, in Durham*." This volume was published in 1771, five years before the letter was written. The material there mentioned was to be used in the *History of Durham* instead. Allan later abandoned his project in favor of William Hutchinson (1732-1814) who at his suggestion took up the work and under his direction and guidance published *The History and Antiquities of the County Palatine of Durham*, Newcastle, 1785-94. Allan modestly remarked that he furnished Hutchinson with a "variety of manuscripts and printed collections unarranged and undigested." *Lit. Anec.*, VI, p. 125.

<sup>5</sup>The diary of this journey, which is declared to be "no otherwise curious than as presenting the first evidence of his sceptical opinions" (Nicolas, Op. Cit., p. xv.), like that of the earlier trip to Edinburgh, although originally in the possession of Joseph Frank, is now unknown.

<sup>6</sup>*Letters*, I, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 7.

Richard de Kelawe, early bishop of Durham, two indentures in French, dated at Stockton, relating to the appointment of governors in the Bishopric of Durham. He sent an account of these entries to Richard Gough, (1735-1809), who gladly inserted it in the new edition of his *British Topography*, then preparing.<sup>8</sup>

Now that he was familiar, through five years intercourse, with the British Museum, and had been made acquainted with the Bodleian, Ritson's next objective was Cambridge. Through the generous offices of friends he had been enabled to borrow books and manuscripts from the University libraries for several years before he had an opportunity to visit them.<sup>9</sup> On July 20, 1780, he set off for Cambridge, intending to spend a few weeks in this depository of ancient learning and then go further into the country for the remainder of the vacation. This plan was not fully carried out, for "momentous" business recalled him to London early in August. It was not, however, until after he had accomplished at least a part of his original purpose and had met with a singular stroke of good fortune in making the acquaintance of Richard Farmer, of whose friendship he was always proud to speak. He sums up the results of his visit thus:

"I saw a great many curious books, made a great many important discoveries: and what is better than all, became intimately acquainted with Dr. Farmer, whom I found a most sensible, liberal, benevolent and worthy man."<sup>10</sup>

The last quarter of the eighteenth century witnessed a remarkable revival of interest in antiquarian studies of all kinds. Various antiquarian societies were founded or rehabilitated during that period. The reconstituted Society of Antiquaries of London, chartered in 1751, was granted permanent quarters in Somerset House by George III in 1780. This acknowledgment that after years of probation the Society had proved its right to a place among the recognized British institutions was highly gratifying to those interested in furthering the study of antiquities. In 1780 also the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland was formed at Edinburgh to do for the north of Britain what the London Society was doing for the south. Two years later the Royal Irish Academy, which had existed intermittently since 1683, was reconsti-

<sup>8</sup>Richard Gough, *British Topography, or an historical account of what has been done for illustrating the Topographical Antiquities of Great Britain and Ireland*, 2nd edition, London, 1780, Vol. I, p. 337.

<sup>9</sup>Surtees, *Op. Cit.*, III, p. 193.

<sup>10</sup>*Letters*, I, p. 57.

tuted.<sup>11</sup> These were but the organized evidences of a widespread general interest in antiquities which was further revealed in various and increasingly numerous publications. Not only were there studies in coins, medals, and heraldry, which previously had engrossed the attention of antiquaries, but there was now searching investigation of the ancient historical records of the various topographical divisions of the kingdom, and of its ancient families and old institutions, to say nothing of purely literary researches.

Prominent among the members of the London Society of this period were the two men whose researches in non-literary antiquities Ritson was instrumental in aiding. George Allan published a number of volumes relating to Durham and Northumberland and was extremely generous and helpful to fellow antiquaries by printing at his private press, "The Grange", many expensive works, by throwing open his valuable library to other students, and by bequeathing to the Society of Antiquaries of London twenty-six quarto volumes of manuscript relating chiefly to the University of Oxford.<sup>12</sup> Richard Gough, described by a late contemporary as the Camden of modern times,<sup>13</sup> produced a very valuable work in his *British Topography*, a much needed supplement to the antedated volumes of Rawlinson,<sup>14</sup> Nicolson,<sup>15</sup> and Gibson.<sup>16</sup> Like Allan he spared no time or expense to preserve and publish the relics of antiquity. He presented to the Bodleian his manuscripts of topography "for the antiquaries' closet", and to Oxford his antiquarian literary collections "for the use of the Professor of Anglo-Saxon."

Ritson's published contribution to this renaissance of antiquarian interest was small. He made valuable and highly appreciated additions to the collections of both Allan and Gough. But the only volume of his own which indicates this type of study is a pamphlet of *Tables, Shewing*

<sup>11</sup>The continental Societies did not come into existence till much later. See H. R. Steeves, *Learned Societies and English Literary Scholarship in Great Britain and the United States*, New York, 1913.

<sup>12</sup>The date of Allan's election as F. S. A. in the *Dict. Nat. Biog.* should be 1774 instead of 1744.

<sup>13</sup>Dibden in Nichols's *Typographical Antiquities of Great Britain*.

<sup>14</sup>Richard Rawlinson, *The English Topographer, . . . by an impartial hand*, London, 1720.

<sup>15</sup>William Nicolson published *The English Historical Library* in three parts, 1696-99; *The Scottish Historical Library*, 1702; and *The Irish Historical Library*, 1724.

<sup>16</sup>In 1605 Edmund Gibson published an English translation of Camden's *Britannia*, with the extensive assistance of a number of British scholars and antiquaries. The three foregoing publications represent the best work of this type in the century preceding Gough's *British Topography*.

*the Descent of the Crown of England*, only fifty copies of which were privately printed in 1778.<sup>17</sup> This little work consists of three parts: Table I, showing "the true hereditary succession of the English crown from Egbert, the first Saxon monarch, to James VI of Scotland"; Table II, "the true hereditary succession from William the Conqueror (supposing a title in him by conquest)"; Table III, "the de facto succession from Edward Ironside." Besides their showing Ritson's political leaning at this time in his career, these compact and accurate tables reveal an early interest in the genealogical side of British history and the patience necessary to explore dry and dusty records of antiquity for the sake of presenting an accurate family tree.

Ritson's published antiquarian work, however, is but a small portion of the material collected and represents but a fraction of the time and energy expended in this interesting field. Not only did he formulate *Tables of the Descent of the Crown*, but he investigated the history of the ancient Northern families of Bailiol and Comyn and embodied the results in a manuscript which was never published.<sup>18</sup> Not only did he furnish Gough with valuable additions for the second edition of his *Topography*, but he continued his researches after that edition was published and made numerous additions and corrections in his own copy.<sup>19</sup> Not only did he assist Allan quite extensively in gathering material about Durham, but even before he left Stockton the attraction of the work proved so great that he began a collection of his own. When he began to explore the libraries in and about London, he made so many additions to his stock that he formed a definite design of printing a "Villare of the County, with useful appendixes". On February 13, 1780, he acquainted Allan with his project and ventured the hope that it would meet with his approbation and gain his assistance.<sup>20</sup> During the next two years Ritson continued to amass material through his own investigations and by the help of Allan, Harrison, and other friends in the county of Durham,<sup>21</sup> but he published none of it. He soon came

<sup>17</sup>The second impression, with some slight alterations in phraseology, was printed in 1783. The tract is now extremely rare. See John Martin, *Bibliographical Catalogue of Privately Printed Books*, 2nd edition, London, 1854.

<sup>18</sup>Lot 967 of Ritson Library sale: "An enquiry into the connection between the families of Bailiol and Comyn in the thirteenth century."

<sup>19</sup>Lot 909 of Ritson Library sale: "Gough's *British Topography*, with MS. additions and corrections by Mr. Ritson . . . . 2 vols., London, 1780."

<sup>20</sup>*Letters*, I, p. 9. Ritson's project became generally known among antiquaries. Gough says (*Op. Cit.*, I, p. 340): "Mr. Joseph Ritson of Stockton has a small MS. collection relating to that place. He is likewise preparing materials for a villare of the county."

<sup>21</sup>*Letters*, I, pp. 36, 56, and *Lit. Anec.*, VIII, p. 133.

to have, in his own words, "so many irons in the fire and other fish to fry", that his attention was diverted from this particular field of antiquarian study to the more strictly literary. The bulk of his topographical material was comprised in a manuscript "Villare Dunelmense, the names of all the towns, villages, hamlets, castles, sea-houses, halls, granges, and other houses and buildings, having any appellation within the Bishopricks or county palatine of Durham." In addition there were two minor manuscripts which must have been prepared at this time: "Topographical Rines[sic]", and "A list of river names in Great Britain and Ireland, with a few etymological notes on them."<sup>22</sup>

Some of the "other irons" which Ritson had in the fire at this time, 1780, were the duties of his new office as High Bailiff, the problem of gaining a livelihood by private practice, and, most absorbing of all, two or three literary projects. Although the major portion of his time was of necessity devoted to the law, his great desire was to have an abundance of leisure for literature, and especially for poetry. From his earliest years he was more interested in poetry than in anything else, but he was not yet able to devote himself to it in any great measure. His concern with local topographical antiquities was preliminary to an absorbing interest in poetical antiquities. His non-professional reading in London served to whet his appetite to such a degree that he soon abandoned all interests outside the requirements of his profession, except poetry. To poetry and the various antiquarian subjects growing out of its study he devoted his leisure from this time on. It was not until 1782 that he produced any noteworthy work in this field, but two earlier and minor publications deserve mention.

Haslewood states that in 1780 Ritson edited the second edition of *The Odes of Sir Charles Hanbury Williams*.<sup>23</sup> He gives this on the authority of Ritson's "own avowal to an intimate acquaintance" and adds that "his labor could not extend beyond collating the proof-sheets."<sup>24</sup> But Nicolas declares that Ritson's connection with the *Odes*

<sup>22</sup>Now MS. Douce, 340, Bodleian. The other manuscripts seem to have been lost or destroyed since the Ritson sale in 1803.

<sup>23</sup>Sir Charles Hanbury Williams (1708-1759), courtier, diplomatist, and satirist, is noted for the licentiousness of his published works, consisting mostly of poetical satires, coarse ballads, and squibs. The original edition of *The Odes* appeared in 1763 as *A Collection of Poems. Principally consisting of the most Celebrated Pieces of Sir Charles Hanbury Williams, Kt. of the Bath*. A fairly complete edition of Williams appeared in three volumes in 1822 as *The Works of the Right Honorable Sir Charles Hanbury Williams, K.B., from the originals in the possession of his Grandson, the Right Honorable the Earl of Essex, with notes by Horace Walpole, Earl of Oxford*.

<sup>24</sup>Haslewood, *Op. Cit.*, p. 5.



"is denied by his nephew and executor, and is rendered extremely unlikely by the disgust which Ritson always expressed at licentious poetry."<sup>25</sup> Despite this denial by the person who is in the best position to know the facts, Sir Sidney Lee, in writing the life of Ritson in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, relies upon Haslewood in stating that Ritson "is said to have edited a second edition of the scurrilous *Odes of Sir Charles Hanbury Williams*"; and Thomas Seccombe, in the life of Williams, says that the *Odes* was "edited by J. Ritson in 1775."<sup>26</sup> There would seem, then, to be ground for difference of opinion although no facts but only assertions have thus far been given.

There is no internal evidence on which to base a decision; the little volume comprising the second edition of the *Odes* contains no preface or introduction, and there are only two or three inconsequential notes. In the complete absence of editorial matter the case seems to resolve itself into a question of the word of Haslewood and the unnamed "intimate acquaintance" against that of Nicolas and the "nephew and executor", with a slight balance in favor of the former because of the statements of Lee and Seccombe. But a more exhaustive study of the situation reveals a preponderance of evidence on the other side.

The statement of Joseph Frank deserves careful consideration from his long and intimate association with Ritson and consequent knowledge of his various activities. Furthermore, no contemporary mention is made of Ritson's connection with the *Odes*.<sup>27</sup> Nicolas's personal reason for denying this work to Ritson—his aversion to licentious poetry—though based on Ritson's own words, should not be given too great weight, for it must be remembered that moral standards vary with different periods and that what was considered "licentious" in 1833 might not have been so viewed half a century earlier. It is true that Ritson boasted of excluding from his collection of *English Songs*, 1783, every verse that might bring a blush to the cheek of innocence<sup>28</sup> but it is equally true that in other volumes he included material quite as coarse and indecent as any passage in the *Odes*.<sup>29</sup> The most nearly con-

<sup>25</sup>Nicolas, *Op. Cit.*, p. xvi, note.

<sup>26</sup>Seccombe evidently does not mean that the volume was printed in 1775, for he adds in parentheses the dates of publication: "(London, 1780, 12mo.; 1784, 12 mo.)". If he means that Ritson's "editing" was done in 1775, that seems highly improbable from the early date, from the five year period before publication, and from the fact that the volume contains no editorial matter whatever.

<sup>27</sup>In itself this would, of course, not be strong evidence, as the contemporary lists of Ritson's works are frequently inaccurate or incomplete.

<sup>28</sup>See the Preface.

<sup>29</sup>See *Observations on Warton, etc., passim*, and prefatory essay to *Ancient English Metrical Romances*. It should be borne in mind that the *Odes* does not

clusive argument against Ritson's editing the *Odes* is the ignorance of Williams and his poems which he exhibits—an ignorance quite unexpected in an editor who, everywhere else, insisted upon a thorough knowledge of the subject in hand or an explicit confession of imperfect acquaintance with it.

In 1783 Ritson printed in *English Songs* "Martialis Epigramma" as "by Sir Charles Hanbury Williams?"<sup>30</sup> This piece is included in the 1780 edition of the *Odes* without any question as to its authenticity. Ten years later, in the advertisement to the first volume of *English Anthology*, Ritson made an earnest appeal for the dates of the birth and death of a number of poets—among them Sir Charles Hanbury Williams—, "in order that the selections from those poets may be duly arranged." The second volume, which appeared the following year, contained two of Williams's odes ("On the death of Matzel" and "On Miss Harriet Hanbury"), both of which are included in the 1780 edition of *Odes*; but the dates of Williams had not yet been determined, a footnote reading: "Born . . . ; dyed 17 . . ."<sup>31</sup> These examples of unfamiliarity with Williams and his verses, taken with the other facts, seem sufficiently conclusive evidence that Ritson did not edit the *Odes*.

In December, 1781, Ritson published anonymously at Newcastle, a piece of satiric humor entitled, *The Stockton Jubilee, or Shakspeare in all his Glory, A Choice Pageant for Christmas Holidays*.<sup>32</sup> This "unwarrantable satire" consisted of extracts from Shakespeare applied to all the principal inhabitants of Stockton. Frank says the "characters were, generally, adapted with the most admirable precision."<sup>33</sup> At any rate the pamphlet seems to have aroused a storm of ill feeling in Stockton. Ritson attempted to conceal from most of his friends that he was its author, although to Ralph Hoar he is said to have entrusted the delivery of various copies to the Newcastle post office.<sup>34</sup> But he wrote to Wadson an implicit acknowledgement of his connection with the

contain the worst of Williams. Although Carlyle spoke of him as "deep in that slop-pail or scandal-department of an extinct generation" (*History of Frederick the Great*, Centenary edition, London, 1898, Vol. V, p. 246.), and the *Quarterly Review* declared his *Collected Works* to contain "specimens of obscenity and blasphemy more horrible than we have before seen collected into one publication" (Vol. XXVIII, p. 47), yet these sweeping denunciations apply in varying degree to not more than half a dozen of the thirty-eight odes in the second edition.

<sup>30</sup>*English Songs*, I, p. 238.

<sup>31</sup>*English Anthology*, II, p. 280.

<sup>32</sup>As early as 1824 this volume was "extremely rare" and it is now practically extinct. There is no copy in the British Museum. See Haslewood, *Op. Cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>33</sup>*Letters*, I, p. 38, note.

<sup>34</sup>Nicolas, *Op. Cit.*, p. xvii.

work. He speaks of having heard "that a most impudent and malicious rascal has been libelling the all-accomplished inhabitants of Stockton in a twelfpenny pamphlet", refers to the treatment accorded Wadeson in it, and then asks if it is true that the scoundrel has been apprehended "and is to be publicly baited at the bull-ring?" But it was useless for him to attempt concealment in this fashion, for it is apparent that he was already suspected by many of his victims. In a postscript to this letter, he says, apropos of a possible visit to his friend:

"But, alas! I understand that my reappearance in Stockton Streets would cost me my life! Gods mercies! My good friend, you see what 'an' infernal world we live in."<sup>35</sup>

Ritson's reading was, from the very first, largely in early printed books and old manuscripts. From historical antiquities he soon turned to poetry, romances, and literary origins. By the time he began to publish the results of his researches he had acquired an extensive acquaintance with the material of a little-known period in the history of English literature and had accumulated a valuable collection of early romances. His first projected work of importance to literary antiquarianism was, *Fabularum Romanensium Bibliotheca: a general catalogue of old romances, French, Italian, Spanish, and English*, to be published in two volumes. A specimen of two sheets of the work to be published under this title appeared in 1782, but the work itself was never printed. It is probable that Ritson found the project too ambitious at this early stage in his work with romances, or it may be that the material he intended to put into these volumes was absorbed by his other publications.<sup>36</sup>

At this time Ritson had in hand another work to which he was devoting a great deal of painstaking research and on which he was bringing to bear all the information concerning the older periods of English poetry which he had been accumulating during his years of private reading and investigating in London. This was a criticism of Warton's *History of English Poetry*,<sup>37</sup> consisting of an enumeration of one hundred and sixteen errors of various degrees of importance, in that justly celebrated work. The first intimation of Ritson's concern

<sup>35</sup>Letters, I. p. 38.

<sup>36</sup>Since no manuscript of this description appeared in the catalogue of his library sale, it would seem that Ritson never progressed far in the actual preparation of this material for the press.

<sup>37</sup>Thomas Warton, *History of English Poetry from the close of the eleventh to the commencement of the eighteenth century*. 3 vols., Oxford, 1774-1781.

with Warton is to be found in a letter to Harrison, written August 6, 1782. He says:

"I have at last put my libel upon Warton into the hands of a bookseller. It is in a fair way of seeing the light by Christmas."<sup>38</sup>

The publisher's speed exceeded his expectations, however, and within two months there appeared anonymously: *Observations on the three first volumes of the History of English Poetry. In a familiar letter to the author.*<sup>39</sup>

When Ritson undertook the criticism of Warton he possessed a wide familiarity with first sources in literature and history. His wonderfully retentive mind was stored with dates and other more or less isolated bits of information gleaned from neglected and forgotten books and manuscripts dealing with early poetry. He had the patience for extremely careful and accurate research after little things, and he had come to place so much importance on correctness in details that he unblushingly demanded absolute accuracy in every writer, no matter how broad his subject. The volumes of Warton's *History* he found to abound in errors of date and name and in inaccuracies of statement, all of which he deemed inexcusable. The *Observations* is a catalogue of some of these errors, noted in the order in which they occur. But this is not all. He employed the most personal, and what in his hands proved the most insolent, means possible for calling them to the attention of Warton—a "familiar letter to the author". His enthusiasm for precision led him into grievous excesses of language. He was unable to restrain his disgust at what he variously designated Warton's laxness, carelessness, ignorance, or dishonesty, in making the errors. As a consequence the volume contains an overabundance of virulence and vituperation. He exhibited an unexampled irascibility of temper and indulged in personal taunts and insulting abuse entirely uncalled for and absolutely indefensible. He missed no opportunity to sneer at Warton's religion, to impeach his motives, to question his sincerity, to taunt him with "ignorance" and "incompetence". There is a constant tendency to exaggeration and an inevitable overshooting of the mark. Some of his

<sup>38</sup>*Letters*, I, p. 58. On October 8, 1782, Ritson again wrote to Harrison: "What say you to my scurrilous libel against Tom Warton?" *Ibid.*, I, p. 60.

<sup>39</sup>Ritson printed the *Observations* "in the size of Mr. Warton's *History*" as "extremely proper to be bound up with that celebrated work, to which they will be found a very useful appendix." He was perfectly sincere in this statement, although his "affrontery" and "grim humor" in making it have been universally ridiculed.

statements are more indicative of the schoolboy than the serious critic. Such hyperboles as this are not infrequent:

"Cotgrave undoubtedly knew a thousand million times more on the matter than you can do."<sup>40</sup>

It is Ritson's manner that is most frequently mentioned in connection with the *Observations*, and it has brought down upon him a perfect torrent of criticism, most of it justified. But his exaggerations, his spleen and ill-nature, indefensible as these are, do not comprise the whole of his work. Stripped of its abusive language there yet remains in the *Observations* a substantial body of criticism which is valuable in itself and for the wholesome influence which it exerted on future literary study.

After a prefatory address to Warton, in which he confesses that he may have occasionally indulged in too great warmth of expression but disavows personal motives, Ritson passes over the introductory Dissertations to the body of the *History*. His most frequent mention is of erroneous glosses in the medieval period. In this particular field Ritson was better prepared than Warton. He was at this time laying the foundation which enabled him later to publish a dozen volumes dealing with the poetry of the period and to furnish them with glossaries more accurate than had previously appeared. As a result of this study almost all of his emendations of Warton are correct.<sup>41</sup> The few instances in which he is at fault<sup>42</sup> only prove the necessity of allowing for human fallibility—a necessity which he refused to take into account when dealing with the works of others.

Warton's errors in glossing, Ritson almost always ascribed not to misunderstanding of the text but to lack of understanding of it. Upon "ignorance" in one thing and another he harped with ungracious constancy. He charged Warton with being ignorant of Anglo-Saxon,<sup>43</sup> of Italian,<sup>44</sup> of the early romances,<sup>45</sup> of English history.<sup>46</sup> In many cases he was correct; in others it would have been charitable to allow for typographical errors, for faulty information, or for the inevitability of mistakes in so large a publication. But Ritson had an eye single to accuracy, and he was slow to admit extenuating circumstances for error. When he did temper the violence of the charge it was usually to that

<sup>40</sup>*Observations*, p. 7.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 6, 9, 11, 14, 16, 22, 23, 25, 30, 31, etc.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 7, 17, 31, etc.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 25, 43.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 20, 35, 39, 42.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 17, 37.

of carelessness, and on this score he had ample opportunity to censure the historian. Judged by Ritson's standards Warton was undoubtedly careless. He was engaged on a gigantic undertaking, and it was not possible for him to devote to each minute point the personal attention and careful research which Ritson demanded. In the case of inaccessible manuscripts and rare books he relied on catalogues or the reports of friends. This failure to investigate original sources Ritson attributed to indolence, and in pointing out the anachronisms and inconsistencies into which Warton was often led by this habit he did much to correct the *History of English Poetry*.<sup>47</sup>

Warton's failure to make personal investigation of all phases of his subject and his failure to keep exact notes of his reading caused him often to make vague allusions or indefinite references to books and manuscripts. In literary matters Ritson was a pretty thorough skeptic. He allowed the validity of no inference or conjecture until it had been substantiated by documentary evidence. When Warton failed of precision in his references, Ritson questioned his ever having seen the work alluded to. He doubted and even denied the existence of manuscripts which he had not himself seen and continued incredulous until convinced by ocular or other substantial proof. This skepticism sometimes placed him in ridiculous positions, but it proved to be not wholly a negative quality in the days of Chatterton, Rowley, Ireland, and their ilk; and Ritson was not in the least deceived by any of these clever forgers.

Ritson questioned Warton's sincerity in numerous instances in which he had detected errors of various sorts, but the most emphatic impeachment was of the Historian's motive in including material which to him seemed superfluous. Warton did fall easily into digression, and his side excursions were usually long. But there was no reason for deciding, as Ritson hastily did, that the digressions were introduced merely "to enhance the bulk and price of his writings". The critic was extremely vexed at the long dissertation, of ninety-seven pages, on the "Gesta Romanorum", prefixed to the third volume. This he called satirically, a "pretty reasonable assistant", asserting that it had no particular connection with the history of English poetry in the sixteenth century, but was inserted because "it serves to fill up the volume, and that's enough".<sup>48</sup> He likewise objected to the inclusion of foreign poets in this History, asserting that the digression on Dante<sup>49</sup> was injected as a space-filler. But here Ritson's failure to appreciate the value of

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 8, 15, 28, 36.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 38. See also pp. 12, 33.

the comparative study of literature—which he came afterward to understand and to apply in his own criticisms<sup>50</sup>—led him into the grievous error of attributing to Warton the habits of the meanest hack-writer.

Judging from the criticism it has aroused, the most serious of all Ritson's charges against Warton is that of plagiarism. One of his critical canons was that every literary debt must be specifically acknowledged, and he was scathing in denunciation of anyone who borrowed from another without giving due credit. He frequently detected unacknowledged borrowings in Warton and freely charged him with "stealing" and "pilfering". While the language of these notes is not in the least justifiable, there has never yet been a successful attempt to explain away the essence of Ritson's criticism—that Warton was guilty of plagiarism.<sup>51</sup> And herein lies perhaps the most permanent value of the *Observations*. The bare corrections contained in this volume might have been given as a mere table of *Errata*, and they would have been given sooner or later and in much more gentlemanly fashion. But the force and virulence of Ritson's manner—the very thing that has been most consistently condemned—operated to place him in an advantageous position to enforce the principles of accuracy, care, and honesty which he championed. The knowledge that there was a keen and uncompromising critic ready to pounce upon editorial laxity and castigate the offender had a not inappreciable share in hastening the day of "modern" editing.<sup>52</sup>

The *Observations* appeared early in October, 1782, and was almost immediately reviewed in the various magazines.<sup>53</sup> The comments of the reviewers are remarkably similar in character. All the writers naturally

<sup>50</sup>See Chapter VII.

<sup>51</sup>Ritson charged Warton with copying a ballad from Percy's *Reliques* (*Observations*, p. 5), with "pilfering" Fawkes's notes to Douglas's *Description of May* (*Ibid.*, p. 24), and with taking from Steevens's *Shakspeare* an explanation of the *Hundred Merry Tales* as the *Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles* (*Ibid.*, p. 43). Mant explains the first instance by saying that both Warton and Percy may have received their copies from a common hand (Richard Mant, *The Poetical Works of Thomas Warton*, Oxford, 1802. Vol. II, p. lxxviii.), but the others remain unexplained.

<sup>52</sup>Instances of the effect of Ritson's criticism in insuring greater accuracy in Percy, Pinkerton, and others will appear in the course of the subsequent discussion. Previous to Ritson sporadic protests against inaccuracy, carelessness, and plagiarism had been made, but without noticeable effect. See H. G. Paul, *John Dennis; his life and criticism*, New York, 1911, p. 72.

<sup>53</sup>*Critical Review*, Vol. LIV, p. 373; *Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. LII, p. 532; *Monthly Review*, Vol. LXVIII, p. 186; *London Review*, February, 1783; *European Magazine*, Vol. III, p. 126. Although the work was anonymous, there was little doubt as to who the author was.

devote most of their space to a condemnation of Ritson's ugly manner and say relatively little about the value of the material. They are unanimous in deprecating the ill nature, violence, and malignity of the "Observer". His abusive language is variously attributed to ignorance, malice, and insanity; and it must be said that some of the writers are almost as virulent with the critic as he was with Warton. But with all this denunciation, no one denies the extreme accuracy and justness of the criticisms when stripped of their violent language. In fact, everywhere it is admitted, though always hurriedly and frequently grudgingly, that the substance of the work is good, and is the result of the minute investigation of a scholar. And yet, it is sought to minimize this admission of the importance of the critic's contribution by saying that his productions are mere "gleanings", "the effect of a mind anxious about little things", and "affect the value of the *History of English Poetry* little if at all." Here undoubtedly began that hatred of the Reviewers as a class which Ritson nursed throughout the remainder of his life. For however violent the language of his own works might be, he never seemed to understand why anyone should be violent with him and seemed to feel that there was always justification for his own intemperance but never for that of another.

The formal reviews did not, however, mark the close of the discussion of Ritson and the *Observations*. The critic's strictures against Warton were too numerous and too serious to be left without an attempt at more extended refutation. Such an attempt was early undertaken and received its initial impulse from a letter in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for November, 1782, signed "Verax", and very plausibly attributed to Warton himself.<sup>54</sup> This communication proved to be the beginning<sup>55</sup> of an epistolary discussion that was continued in the columns of the *Gentleman's Magazine* during the whole of the following year.<sup>56</sup> After a dozen letters had been contributed, the editor declared that he "had sufficiently shown his impartiality in the controversy" and would now "beg leave to dismiss it." But whereas the editor may have been impartial, the Warton adherents among the contributors very greatly outnumbered the Ritson allies, only three of the letters defending the

<sup>54</sup>On Nov. 3, 1782, Warton wrote to Nichols asking the "very singular favor" of the insertion of an enclosed letter "in this month's *Gentleman's Magazine*", urging the absolute necessity of so early an appearance, and enjoining strict secrecy in the whole transaction. See *Lit. Illust.*, IV, p. 739.

<sup>55</sup>Warton's most recent biographer says that he was later "drawn into the controversy . . . and probably even contributed a letter himself". Clarissa Rinaker, *Thomas Warton; a biographical and critical study*, University of Illinois, 1916, p. 113.

<sup>56</sup>See Vol. LII, pp. 527-8, 571-5; Vol. LIII, pp. 42-7, 126-7, 281-4, 416.



critic. It was literally true, as one of the correspondents remarked, that Warton had "unkennelled a pack of literary bloodhounds that seemed to hunt his less-friended antagonist to death." Among others the combatants included, on Warton's side, his brother Joseph, the Rev. Thomas Russell of New College, Oxford, and the Rev. John Bowle; and on Ritson's, the critic himself, and his friend John Baynes,<sup>57</sup> of Gray's Inn.

From a beginning in which the correspondents seriously tried to reestablish some of the points which Ritson had attacked, the controversy soon degenerated into personalities. The discussion was characterized by a good deal of violence, which caused the writers at times to lose sight of their subject and indulge in personal taunts and abusive flings at one another. Most of the correspondents played the rôle of advocates, and, holding briefs for their respective clients, they were blinded, wilfully or no, to whatever virtues the opponent might possess. The less frenzied of the controversialists acknowledged that Warton's errors deserved reprehension and admitted that Ritson displayed great learning and critical acumen in detecting them, though he was to be censured for presenting his material in an ungentlemanly manner. With these men the dispute centered mainly upon particular criticisms, among which the most prominent were Ritson's challenge to Warton to prove his statement that "anciently in England ladies were sheriffs of counties"<sup>58</sup> and his denial of the existence of such a person as Messen Jordi.<sup>59</sup> These and similar points were established by the contestants for both sides by the simple and obvious expedient of placing their own construction upon whatever evidence could be marshalled.

But Ritson's critics could make no great headway at answering his strictures against Warton and took up the easier task of censuring his method. In doing this they frequently indulged in language as intemperate as that they criticized. The logomachy was thus marked by the intemperance and violence, and often by the coarseness and scurrility, which characterized most of the literary controversies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Ritson was justly censured, on the grounds of common decency, for dragging obscene material<sup>60</sup> into his work. His eccentric spelling and altered grammatical distinctions<sup>61</sup> have little other

<sup>57</sup>John Baynes (1758-1787), special pleader of Gray's Inn, was a miscellaneous writer of some note. At his death he bequeathed to Ritson a very curious collection of old romances. See *Lit. Anec.*, VIII, pp. 113-115.

<sup>58</sup>*Observations*, p. 10.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>60</sup>Marlow's tenets, *Observations*, p. 40; Scoggin's jest, *Ibid.*, p. 20, note; etc.

<sup>61</sup>Eccentricities of spelling begun in the early *Versees* are enlarged upon here. The outstanding peculiarity of the orthography of *Observations* is the use

authority to support them than personal whim. He is unwarrantably vicious in many of his thrusts at Warton. But these violations of propriety are hardly sufficient justification for his opponents' falling into the very errors for which they reproached him. Their most flagrant and most persistently reiterated abuse is that of imputing to him motives of personal animosity. It is equally absurd to conjecture that he was "angry that a history of our poetry should have been undertaken by a scholar of polite taste and not by a "pedant"<sup>62</sup> and to declare that the *Observations* was intended "to depreciate an individual and not benefit the public."<sup>63</sup> Ritson had no conceivable reason for personal enmity to Warton and consistently disavowed any such motive. It is only justice to take at their face value these words in the opening paragraph of *Observations*:

"Personal motives I cannot possibly have been influenced by, and utterly disavow. And were you able to falsify every charge I have here brought against you, whatever might be your severity, I should kiss the rod with resignation and even pleasure: as, I assure you, the satisfaction I should have experienced, in finding your work entirely free from error, would have been infinitely beyond any I can be supposed to feel, in thus making myself the public instrument of its detection."

The reviewer of the *Observations* in the *London Review* expressed the common judgment of most of Warton's friends when he said: "Mr. Warton, it is to be hoped, for the honor of literature, will think it infinitely beneath him to immortalize such a critic, even with a damnation". In effect Warton complied with this wish, and although his letter which precipitated the long discussion in the *Gentleman's Magazine* was a virtual reply to Ritson, he took no acknowledged notice of the critic. There is, however, difference of opinion as to the true effect of Ritson's attack upon Warton himself. Bishop Percy and Thomas Caldecott of New College, both friends of Warton, were of the opinion that Ritson's pamphlet caused him to abandon the *History* in its incomplete stage at the third volume.<sup>64</sup> Mant, author of the first Memoir of the Historian, declared that "an intimate friend of Mr. Warton has informed me, that he neither allowed the justness, nor felt, though he

of "hissel", "theirselves", etc., for "himself", "themselves", etc. Robert Lowth (1710-1787), in his *Short Introduction to English Grammar*, 2nd edition, 1786, p. 43, admits the use of such constructions, but nowhere uses them himself.

<sup>62</sup>*Critical Review*, Vol. LIV, p. 373.

<sup>63</sup>Ritson's *English Songs*, ed. Thos. Park, London, 1813. Preface, p. xxxviii, note.

<sup>64</sup>Thomas Caldecott to Thomas Percy, March 21, 1803; and Percy to Caldecott, August 17, 1803, *Lit. Illust.*, VIII, p. 372.

might lament, the keenness of the censure."<sup>65</sup> Dr. Rinaker, Warton's latest biographer, suggests the distraction of his interest to other fields,<sup>66</sup> as the most plausible explanation of his neglect of the work. Warton's only personal remark occurs in a letter to George Steevens, who had just furnished him with some information about Ritson. There he declares that he "could disprove most of his [Ritson's] objections were it a matter of any consequence."<sup>67</sup> That he felt the censure more keenly than he cared to admit is evinced by the fact that this statement was written five days after he had dispatched to the *Gentleman's Magazine* the pseudonymous letter already cited, in which he attempted to reestablish many of the points Ritson had attacked.

If there is divided opinion as to the effect upon Warton of the *Observations* and the storm it aroused, there are equally divergent judgments on the question of the reaction upon Ritson. Haslewood asserts that Ritson afterwards became convinced of the unjustness of his attack on Warton, and "the reasoning of his frank friend, Mr. Park, drew from him an acknowledgement of his own impropriety, and induced him, at a later period, to buy up and destroy all the copies of the work that could be obtained."<sup>68</sup> Support is given this view by Ellis's confession that his anger at Ritson's attack on the *Historian* was mollified by the critic's repentance<sup>69</sup> and by Anderson's statement that he had heard Ritson speak of Warton "in a placable and penitential way."<sup>70</sup> Ritson's nephew, however, denied that his uncle ever repented, and Nicolas attributed the statement to "an amiable motive to extenuate the conduct of Ritson, which, nevertheless, fails because it happens to be without foundation."<sup>71</sup> In view of these contradictions and in the want of evidence that Ritson ever went so far as to destroy the available copies of the book, the only opportunity to determine how sincere his repentance was—if indeed he did repent—lies in a review of his later allusions to Warton.

<sup>65</sup>Mant, *Op. Cit.*, p. lxxvii.

<sup>66</sup>*Op. Cit.*, p. 112.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup>Haslewood, *Op. Cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>69</sup>George Ellis to Thomas Park, Sept. 27, 1799, quoted by Haslewood, *Op. Cit.*, p. 27, note.

<sup>70</sup>Anderson to Percy, May 21, 1803, *Lit. Illust.*, VIII, p. 113. There is no evidence to support the view set forth in an unsigned article in the *Encyclopædia Britannica* that the storm of anger aroused by his criticism greatly delighted Ritson. See art. "Ritson".

<sup>71</sup>*Op. Cit.*, p. xxiii.

On hearing of Warton's death Ritson wrote to his friend Walker:

"Well! 'I war not with the dead', and shall treat his ashes with the reverence I ought possibly to have bestowed on his person. Unfortunately he is introduced, not always in the most serious or respectful manner, in a work which has been long printed, but which I think my book-seller does not choose to publish till both the editor and all his friends and enemies are buried in oblivion."<sup>72</sup>

The work to which he refers, *Ancient Songs, from the time of King Henry III to the Revolution*, was printed in two volumes in 1787, but not published until 1792.<sup>73</sup> The material for these volumes was amassed at least three years before the Historian's death and at a time when the editor could have had no thought of that event. Though tardy, the expression of regret at his flippancy and disrespect is highly creditable to his character. Later editors of the *Ancient Songs*, evidently guided by Ritson's implied wish, have omitted the allusions to Warton.<sup>74</sup>

In the preface to his edition of *Poems . . . by Laurence Minot*, published in 1795, Ritson criticised Warton's handling of these poems in his *History*, and pointed out some errors which he ascribed to misjudgment and ignorance. The language employed is plain and direct, but in no wise meant to give offense. Although Ritson had not given over his antagonism to Warton's faults, his comments here lack the personal direction which was so objectionable in his earlier work, and he exhibits a manner which, compared with that of the *Observations*, may without the least danger of overpraise be characterized as "softened asperity and tempered virulence."<sup>75</sup>

But the change of spirit which Ritson had manifested in his remarks on the death of Warton, in the preface to *Minot's Poems*, and in comments to friends, is not evident in his latest publications. After a period of editorial inactivity comprising seven years of severe illness which left his faculties impaired, he published *Ancient English Metrical Romances* and *Bibliographia Poetica*, in 1802. In both these works Ritson displays an acerbity of language which is not exceeded in the *Observations*. He devotes several pages of the introductory *Essay in Metrical Romances*

<sup>72</sup>*Letters*, I, p. 169.

<sup>73</sup>Ritson has several comments on Warton in his *English Songs and Remarks . . . on Shakspeare*, both published in 1783, but it is obvious that they will throw no light on the question in hand because those works were in preparation simultaneously with the *Observations* and he could not then have anticipated the full effect of that publication.

<sup>74</sup>The most offensive notes occurred on pp. 37 and 286 of the original edition. The only reference to Warton in the second edition, 1829, is a very brief and eminently civil allusion, Vol. II, p. 233.

<sup>75</sup>Mant, *Op. Cit.*, p. lxxvii.

to a refutation of Warton's theory of the origin of romance, and overlooks no opening for a vicious personal thrust at Warton or a contemptuous sneer at the church which he served.<sup>76</sup> The comments on Warton and his *History* which appear in *Bibliographia Poetica* are much tempered and softened, but it seems that the want of extravagance in language was not the result of voluntary restraint on Ritson's part. The manuscript of this work was presented to Thomas Park for criticism, and he declares that he blotted out a "severe sarcasm against Warton's mendacious *History of English Poetry*, which Ritson forebore to reinstate."<sup>77</sup> Either on this or a previous occasion Ritson expressed to Park his regret for his disrespectful treatment of Warton, but he was never able wholly to give over his contempt for the Historian's laxness in handling material. It appears, then, from Ritson's correspondence and his private expressions to various friends that he realized he had overstepped the bounds of propriety in some of the notes in *Observations* and that, especially after Warton's death, he was genuinely repentant. For a time he sought to make amends in a negative fashion by publishing nothing virulent about Warton and even by commending his service to literature when he had occasion to mention the *History*. But all this is largely overbalanced by a return to the old violence and extravagance of statement in his last published works. The almost inevitable conclusion is that his hatred of Warton and the *History* was too deep-seated for any effective and thorough-going repentance to have been possible.

The great amount of discussion created by the publication of *Observations* is ample evidence that there was something more than sound and fury to that indictment of Warton. In spite of the fact that every effort was made to discredit Ritson and his work by emphasizing the indefensible coarseness of his manner and ignoring the kernel of his criticism, it was impossible to obscure the fact that he was a man of wide and accurate learning in the older periods of English poetry, a critic of keen perception, and a powerful antagonist. As such he became almost immediately known; but his most vulnerable point was always his vicious manner of writing, and an attack upon this too frequently diverted attention from the real value of his criticisms. The editors of Warton illustrate this fact.

Thomas Park planned to include the body of Ritson's notes in his edition of the *History of English Poetry*.<sup>78</sup> Although this project was never carried out, it appears from Park's comments on Ritson in his

<sup>76</sup>*Anc. Eng. Met. Romances*, 2nd edition, 1884, Vol. I, p. 2, and *passim*.

<sup>77</sup>Haselwood, *Op. Cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>78</sup>See announcement of this projected edition in *Athenaeum*, Vol. V, p. 245.

edition of the latter's *English Songs*, that he would have manifested but little charity towards him. He concludes a rather severe arraignment of Ritson with a mention of his proposed edition of the *History* when "as an editorial advocate, it will become my province to rebut a regular indictment, comprising seventeen counts, against the veracity of our poetical historian."<sup>79</sup> Although we are deprived of this formal attack upon Ritson by Park's failure to edit Warton, there is an equally earnest attempt to discredit the critic in Richard Price's edition of the *History*.<sup>80</sup> Price used more than half of Ritson's notes in his edition, but this did not prevent his indulging in an extremely ill-natured and malicious attack upon the antiquary, in which he conjured up all his personal faults and individual foibles against him and said next to nothing of the material that really concerned the editor and student of Warton.<sup>81</sup> Fairer treatment is accorded Ritson in the 1840 and 1874 editions of the *History*. The substantial body of his notes is included, and he is given credit for what he actually contributed toward a correct History of English Poetry, with no attempt to depreciate its importance by cataloguing the private sins for which he may be held accountable.

It has been contended that Ritson was not competent to judge the *History of English Poetry* because he did not know it as a whole but only saw it as so many separate minutiae. But Ritson did not attempt a criticism of the *History* on any comprehensive scale. His work was avowedly the detecting of errors of commission and the finding of faults, which, though minute, detract from the accuracy of a work and hence diminish its value for the careful student and conscientious reader. That Ritson succeeded in this task no one has denied. But many have been ignorant of, or have ignored, the fact that this and not something more ambitious was what he set out to accomplish. It is not the greatest type of criticism, perhaps not even great, but such as it is, it ought to be judged on its merits. It is task work that must be done, and at this particular time in the history of English literature it needed especially to be done.

<sup>79</sup>Advertisement to Park's edition of *English Songs*, 1813.

<sup>80</sup>*The History of English poetry . . . . By Thomas Warton . . . . A new edition carefully revised with numerous additional notes by the late Mr. Ritson. . . . and by the Editor [Richard Price]. 4 vols. London. 1824.*

<sup>81</sup>The unjustness of Price's treatment of Ritson was ably exposed by a writer in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. XCV, pp. 486-8.

## CHAPTER IV

### SHAKESPEARE CRITICISMS<sup>1</sup>

Undertakes serious critical study of Shakespeare—His place in the changing attitude toward the dramatist—Publishes *Remarks*—Its general nature—Subsequent relations of Ritson and Steevens—Critical reception of *Remarks*—Publishes *Quip Modest*—Abuse of Reviewers and Steevens—Misunderstanding with Reed—Critical reception of *Quip Modest*—Publishes *Cursory Criticisms*—Violent attack on Reviewers and Malone—Malone's reply—Ritson's later attitude toward Malone—General theories of editing—Specific criticisms of Shakespeare—Appreciation of *Hamlet*—Plans an edition of the plays and poems—Publishes two pages of *Comedy of Errors*—The lost manuscripts—Conclusion.

Ritson's early years in London were filled with a number of literary interests. He did not allow his concern with Warton's *History* or with early romances to consume all his time. The earliest of his letters and all his publications reveal a wide familiarity with Shakespeare, to whose works he seems to have devoted a great deal of attention from the very first. *The Stockton Jubilee, or Shakspeare in all his Glory*, was a youthful display of Shakesperian knowledge for the edification of friends back in Stockton. But with increased maturity of thought and with the stimulus of enlarged reading he soon turned his study to more serious ends. The century in which he lived is replete with editors and critics of Shakespeare. The increasing volume of Shakespeare literature as the century advanced represents that growing interest in the old English writers and increasing familiarity with their works which we are told was one of the "beginnings of romanticism". This increasing interest was a complex growth. There are the bare mathematical facts of the increasing number of Shakespeare references and allusions in the literature and in the private correspondence of the century; the increasing frequency with which new editions appeared; and the rapidly growing army of annotators, commentators, and essayists. Then there is the less tangible but no less real fact of the changing attitude toward Shake-

<sup>1</sup>The present chapter is an enlargement and revision of an article entitled, "Joseph Ritson and Some Eighteenth Century Editors of Shakespeare" which was published in *Shakespeare Studies*, By members of the Department of English of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1916, pp. 253-275. The material is here used with the permission of the Department of English.

speare; from a patronizing view of the dramatist as an inspired barbarian to a conception of him as the transcendent artist; from a blind and ignorant worship to a sane and serious study; from a heterogeneous hodge-podge of criticism to a common conception of the duties of the editor and critic. This evolution was gradual, but it was more rapid toward the close of the century than at the beginning. Some of the greatest and some of the least of England's literary men helped it along. To the lesser, oftentimes, was it given to correct the greater and to make straight the paths for feet more worthy to tread them. Among these minor agencies Ritson is to be classed. Although his chief claim to attention in the history of English letters must continue to rest upon the work with ballads and romances which is to be discussed in the succeeding chapters, yet he deserves more recognition than he has thus far received as a critic and emendator of Shakespeare. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he had a profound reverence for Shakespeare and considered him the great universal genius. He had a thorough knowledge of the original quartos and folios, which enabled him to detect textual mutilations and alterations. Through his influence these first texts received a more ample measure of the consideration due them at the hands of Shakespeare's editors. Ritson possessed ideas of editorship and a conception of the function of the critic which were in advance of his day, and by unremitting insistence upon them he helped to establish standards which are today recognized as inviolable. His own contributions to Shakespearean interpretation are by no means to be ignored. Most at home in the minutiae of textual correction, he was not devoid of an appreciation of the characters and the plays as a whole, and made many sound observations upon them.

To these qualities the personal equation added more in the case of Ritson than in that of perhaps any one of his contemporaries. The personal controversial flavor which was characteristic of the *Observations* is to be detected in almost equal degree in all his publications on Shakespeare. He often put Shakespeare in the background while he lashed Steevens or Dr. Johnson or Malone, or even Reed or Farmer. But he respected these men, and in his less heated moments invariably repented of his harsh treatment of them. Such conduct again brought down upon his head the scorn and ridicule of the reviewers. The *Reviews* may have killed Keats; they only galvanized Ritson into action and gave us one, and perhaps two, Shakespeare pamphlets we should not otherwise have had. Because the Shakespeare publications afforded Ritson a means of carrying on personal warfare and seemed, in some degree, set forth chiefly for that purpose, and because the body of criticism is substantially the same through all the volumes, it will be well to defer the consider-



ation of his contribution to Shakespearean knowledge until the chronology of his pamphlets has been traced.

Before the vigor of the discussion of his attack upon Warton had begun to wane, Ritson issued a second controversial volume entitled, *Remarks, Critical and Illustrative, on the Text and Notes of the Last Edition of Shakspeare*. It was directed against the Johnson and Steevens *Shakspeare* of 1778,<sup>2</sup> especially against Steevens, and the method pursued was substantially that followed in the Warton tract. In this volume, as in the earlier one, Ritson disavowed any personal motive in his remarks. He declared himself enlisted in "the cause of Shakspeare and truth", and called Shakspeare the God of his idolatry. But he recognized that "to controvert the opinions or disprove the assertions" of such men as Johnson, Steevens, Tyrwhitt, and Farmer, he must have some justification, especially where an undue warmth of expression was occasionally to be detected. In this, however, he considered that he was only exercising the right which these men before him had practised, and which it was the privilege of every man to exercise,—that of contradicting the opinions of his predecessors when they were thought or proved to be erroneous. But at the same time he was anxious to avoid the imputation of animus or of mean quibbling. In dealing with other men he declared he would "not be found to have expressed himself in a manner inconsistent with a due sense of obligations and the profoundest respect. Such, at least, was his intention, such has been his endeavor, and such is his hope."<sup>3</sup>

Of the 457 notes in the *Remarks* approximately half are concerned with textual emendations, the remainder with errors of judgment of Steevens and his fellow commentators. It was in notes of the latter type that the venom of Ritson's nature was exhibited. He frequently overstepped the bounds of literary propriety in ridiculing Steevens's "blunders", in questioning his motives, and in exposing his "ignorance". And yet there was underlying all this unscholarly manner a vein of pertinent criticism which struck home to Steevens.

Although the *Remarks* was published anonymously, Ritson made no effort to conceal the authorship,<sup>4</sup> and Steevens knew almost immediately who was the author of the book and spread the information among his

<sup>2</sup>*The Plays of William Shakspeare, with the corrections and illustrations of various commentators; to which are added notes by S. Johnson and G. Steevens.* Second edition revised and augmented, 10 vols., London, 1778.

<sup>3</sup>*Remarks, etc.*, Preface, p. viii.

<sup>4</sup>On going to press Ritson informed Harrison, who seemed to be a sort of Father Confessor for his literary life, of the nature of his new work and added boastfully, "I will turn the world upside down." *Letters*, I, p. 61.

friends.<sup>5</sup> It was little to be expected that Steevens, whose insinuating abuse had already disposed of a brace of critical opponents, would let pass without some effort at refutation, a charge more serious against his literary reputation and more ably sustained than that of either Collins or Jennens.<sup>6</sup> Under the signature of "Alciphron" he attacked the *Remarks* in a letter to the *St. James's Chronicle* for June 5, 1783.<sup>7</sup> He dismissed the *Remarks* as trivial and insignificant, as treating not a single "important and shining passage of Shakspeare". Signing himself "Justice", Ritson replied the next week that the design of the "Remarker" had been to prove the late edition of Shakespeare "an execrable bad one; and this, I say, he has done".<sup>8</sup> Such juvenile assertion and denial did nothing, of course, to establish the critical status of Ritson or his book; it served merely as means of escape for personal animus. When the edge of their rancor had grown dull, Steevens and Ritson continued on friendly terms. The editor kept the critic informed of his various undertakings and was from time to time supplied by him with interesting notes on Shakespeare.<sup>9</sup>

It was perhaps largely because of their continued correspondence that Ritson came eventually to feel that his published attack upon Steevens was quite unworthy of himself. More than a decade after its appearance he wrote to his nephew, who had undertaken to make some corrections in it:

"In behalf of the *Remarks* I have nothing to say. Indeed, I should think you much better employed in putting them into the fire, than in a vain attempt to

<sup>5</sup>See the following letters: George Steevens to Thos. Warton, April 16, 1783, in John Wooll's *Biographical Memoirs of Joseph Warton*, London, 1806, p. 398; John Bowle to Thos. Warton, May 18, 1783, *ibid.*, p. 402; M. Lort to Bishop Percy, May 19, 1783, *Lit. Illus.*, VIII, p. 457.

<sup>6</sup>In defense of Capell, John Collins (1748-1797) charged Steevens with plagiarism in a *Letter to George Hardinge, Esq. on the subject of a passage in Mr. Steevens' Preface to his impression of Shakspeare*. London, 1777. Steevens never forgave this attack and let slip no opportunity to hurl violent epithets at Collins, relating disparaging anecdotes concerning him, and fathering upon him a number of highly questionable notes in the 1778 *Shakspeare*. Charles Jennens (1700-1773) made a similar accusation against Steevens, and the editor, not without some foundation, sneered at him unmercifully, both in reviews and newspapers. See *Critical Review*, Vol. XXXIV, p. 475; XXXV, p. 230, and *Public Advertiser* for Jan. 26 and Feb. 14, 1771.

<sup>7</sup>Reprinted in *Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. LIII, p. 594.

<sup>8</sup>*St. James's Chronicle*, June 10, 1783. Reprinted in *Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. LIII, p. 595.

<sup>9</sup>See *Letters*, II, pp. 32, 123, 171, 193, and Advertisement to *Bibliographia Poetica*.

diminish the inaccuracies of such a mass of error, both typographical and authorial." <sup>10</sup>

Ritson's final estimate of Steevens accords well with the judgment of posterity. As a commentator he recognized his rival as a man of acuteness and wit, whose arguments were "always ingenious and plausible, but not in every way convincing", but as an editor of Shakespeare he thought him deficient in true poetical feeling, and devoid of reverence for his author.

The Warton controversy had brought Ritson into a prominence not altogether enviable as a critic and antagonist, and the reception of the *Remarks* by the *Reviews* was largely influenced by the opinion previously formed by its author.<sup>11</sup> The minute accuracy in textual collations, the extensive learning displayed, the contributions to Shakespeare interpretation—all these were damned with faint praise as the reviewers hastened on to condemn the offensive assurance, the unwonted egotism, and the unparalleled violence of the author.<sup>12</sup> Using the methods which they condemned, they turned Ritson's own weapons upon himself and accused him of plagiarizing from the *Supplements* of Malone and Steevens<sup>13</sup> material to correct their own faults. To the arch-enemy of plagiarists and editorial defaulters, this was a serious charge; and he hastened to enter his denial. In addition to Ritson's assertion that he "was not aware of being anticipated in more than a single instance", it appears from chronology that plagiarism was all but impossible. The *Remarks* was put to the press as early as the first week in October, 1782, and was published in the spring of 1783. Malone's *Second Supplement* appeared early in the same year, antedating Ritson's volume by only a few weeks at best. It is this work that contains the most of the "purloined" notes (the first supplement being largely taken up with the apocryphal plays)

<sup>10</sup>*Letters*, II, p. 123. Ritson seems never to have been wholly satisfied with the accuracy of the *Remarks* and found it necessary to publish two lists of *Errata*, mostly typographical. Yet he found a melancholy sort of pleasure in the conviction that his pamphlet was less inaccurate than the edition of Shakespeare which it criticized.

<sup>11</sup>While the reviewers did not mention Ritson, since the volume was anonymous, yet they invariably connected this work with the *Observations* as the production of "Wartono Mastix" or the "modern Zoilus".

<sup>12</sup>See *Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. LIII, pp. 593-5; *Critical Review*, Vol. LVI, pp. 81-9; *Monthly Review*, Vol. LXX, pp. 334-8.

<sup>13</sup>*Supplement to the edition of Shakspeare's plays published in 1778 . . . . containing additional observations by several of the former commentators . . . . with notes by the editor [Malone] and others.* London, 1780. *A Second Appendix to Mr. Malone's Supplement containing additional observations by the editor of the Supplement.* London, 1783.

and it is obvious that Ritson could not have seen it in time to make any changes in his own publication. The logical conclusion is that the notes in question occurred simultaneously to Ritson and Malone (or Steevens), working independently.

While his own books were little praised and largely censured, Ritson frequently saw less accurate productions accorded unalloyed praise. It was impossible for him to understand why of two works, the one moderately correct but urbane in manner, the other flawless in fact but vituperative in tone, the less perfect should be the more highly commended. Quick to detect and anxious to punish any personal thrust at himself, he refused to grant to others the same privilege, and indeed seemed not to know when he had spoken so sharply as to give offense. He proclaimed himself enlisted in the cause of truth, and in her service he considered everything fair. If enthusiasm for his goddess sometimes betrayed him into ridiculous excesses and violent exaggerations, he either did not recognize it, or, recognizing, justified the means by the end. But his critics refused to take this view and largely ignored the truth of his writings while they condemned his manner. The reviewers seemed even to go out of their way to censure him. From this he came to believe that they were in league to destroy his literary character and grew to feel that he had a personal grievance with them.

When the tardy reviews of the third edition of the Johnson and Steevens *Shakspeare*<sup>14</sup> appeared, they gave high praise to Reed, the editor, and sneered at Ritson as an "orthographic mutineer" and as a critic relegated him to the ranks of the "unimportant".<sup>15</sup> This taunt of the reviewers came as an added insult to Ritson. Although more than two hundred notes from the *Remarks* had been adopted in Reed's edition, yet Ritson chose to consider himself very unjustly treated because some of his notes were omitted and a few were held up to biting and sarcastic ridicule. Being extremely sensitive about his own work, guarding it, as he said, as jealously as a father does his offspring, he felt it his duty "to defend every part of it from injury and misrepresentation", and declared that he knew of "no difference between the integrity or character of a writer and that of any other individual, nor ought an unjust charge against the former to remain unrefuted, any more than one against the latter."<sup>16</sup> Thus stung to action he took up the notes he had

<sup>14</sup>*The Plays of William Shakspeare, in ten volumes. . . . to which are added notes by S. Johnson and G. Steevens. The third edition revised and augmented by the editor of Dodsley's Collection of Old Plays* [Isaac Reed]. London, 1785.

<sup>15</sup>*Critical Review*, Vol. LXII, pp. 321-9; Vol. LXXXVII, pp. 19-25.

<sup>16</sup>*Quip Modest*, Preface, p. v.

made "in turning over the revised edition immediately after its publication, but had lain aside and almost forgotten", and put them to press as, *The Quip Modest; a few words by way of Supplement to Remarks, Critical and Illustrative, on the Text and Notes of the Last Edition of Shakspeare; occasioned by a republication of that Edition, Revised and Augmented by the Editor of Dodsley's Old Plays*. As its title suggests, the substance of this little volume consists mainly of answers to the objections which had been made to the *Remarks*. The dozen new notes are about equally divided between textual emendations and corrected glosses.

The most interesting part of the book, however, and that which attracted immediate notice, is the Preface. In it he openly attacked the reviewers and Steevens, and by inuendo Reed himself. He heaped scorn and invective on "those very good Christians" his "liberal and candid friends", the reviewers. He accused them of "passing sentence upon books which they never read, and on the character of writers whom they do not know." In short, he was so violent in his strictures as to obscure, for his immediate readers at least, almost everything except the points of personal controversy.

Of Steevens's share in the 1785 *Shakspeare* Ritson had little definite information. The notes in which he considered himself disrespectfully treated were signed with the editor's initials, but he did not choose to think they came from Reed. On the contrary, he held that they were "furnished by some obliging friend, who had desired to be effectually concealed under the sanction of the editor's signature". That he believed this "obliging friend" to be Steevens is clear from the following comment which was a part of the original Preface:

"This worthy gentleman is probably the infamous scoundrel who published 'An address to the curious in ancient poetry,'<sup>17</sup> as, however little relation it may have to Shakspeare, the author has had interest enough to procure it a place in the 'List of Detached Pieces of Criticism, etc.,' prefixed to the revised edition. A congeniality of disposition in the Critical Reviewers procured this fellow a different reception from these literary hangmen, from that which he may one day experience from a well-known practical professor of the same mystery."

After a few copies of the *Quip Modest* had been sold, Ritson came to feel, or more probably, was persuaded, that this note was "too strong for the person alluded to", and he stopped the sale of the work long enough

<sup>17</sup>A familiar address to the curious in English Poetry, more particularly to the readers of Shakspeare. By Thersites Literarius, London, 1784. This rather inconsequential tract was written in the first person as though it came from Ritson, and gave him great offense.

to cancel this page and substitute another bearing the following—perhaps ironical—statement:<sup>18</sup>

“Impressed as I have been with this idea, I ought in common justice to acknowledge that I suspect no one in particular to whom I am thus indebted. Above all I wish to declare, that the candor, liberality, and politeness which distinguish Mr. Steevens, utterly exclude *him* from every imputation of this nature.”

Besides the disrespectful comments which he attributed to Steevens, there were three notes in the 1785 edition of Shakespeare at which Ritson was particularly offended, in which, to use his own words, “I found or imagined I was treated with contempt”.<sup>19</sup> These were: (1) In the *Remarks*, p. 12, Ritson had expressed the belief that “King Edward shovel boards”, (*Merry Wives of Windsor*, I. i. 154) referred to “broad shillings of Edward III.” and not of Edward VI, as Farmer had stated. An italicized note in the Reed *Shakspeare* castigated him for “censuring” Farmer, denied his assertion, and dismissed the note as “not worth consideration.”<sup>20</sup> (2) After devoting a page and a half to Ritson’s note on the mortality of fairies, (*Midsummer Night’s Dream*, II. i. 101) the editor concluded thus:

“It is a misfortune as well to the commentators, as to the readers of Shakespeare, that so much of their time is obliged to be employed in explaining and contradicting conjectures and assertions. . . . A future editor of our author may without any detriment to his work omit this note, which I should have been better pleased to have had no occasion to incumber the page with.”<sup>21</sup>

(3) Upon Ritson’s demanding that Dr. Johnson present some other proof than his own assertion that Shakespeare was guilty of an anachronism in introducing *rapier* into *Richard II.*, IV. i. 40, the editor remarked:

“It is probable that Dr. Johnson did not see the necessity of citing any authority for a fact so well known, or suspect that any person would demand one.”<sup>22</sup>

Upon reading these notes one wonders why Ritson should have been so wrought up as to feel that he had a personal quarrel with the man who wrote them. It is certain that imagination and a super-sensitive nature played a rather large part in exciting his anger. Outside

<sup>18</sup>Ritson was not yet far enough removed from his original quarrel with Steevens to treat him with the candor which he later displayed.

<sup>19</sup>*Letters*, I, p. 105.

<sup>20</sup>Reed’s *Shakspeare*, I, p. 253.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, III, p. 37.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, V. p. 227.

of the two letters that have been preserved, the only explanation of his point of view is to be found in the *Quip Modest*. There he admitted that he was guilty of a "gross blunder" about "King Edward shovel boards", but he resented the statement that he had censured Farmer, for whom he professed the highest regard, and declared that he had only expressed a difference of opinion. In the discussion on the mortality of fairies Ritson knew he was in the right, and he steadfastly maintained his ground. It was the insinuating nature of this note to which he objected, and to the editor's parting fling he replied in his richest vein:

"The editor might, without any detriment to his work, have omitted the above note; but I cannot think that the *page* has any particular reason to complain of the incumbrance, as it would be no difficult matter to point out several hundreds groaning under an equal burthen".<sup>23</sup>

In the last note Ritson was incensed at the notion that he should be criticized for insisting upon an editor or commentator performing his proper function—that of substantiating opinion with fact wherever possible.

Ritson immediately made known his dissatisfaction with these notes. He held much store by Reed's friendship and professed to believe that they came from some "friend in the dark", possibly Steevens, rather than from the ostensible editor. Hearing that Ritson had taken offense, Reed wrote him a very cordial letter expressing regret that anything in his work should tend to alienate a friend. But he nowhere denied having written the notes to which Ritson objected, and the general tenor of his letter implied that he was their author. Ritson replied that he had no desire to cause a disagreement, acknowledged the right of Reed and every other man to dispute his statements and point out his errors, but, he said, in homely illustration of his contention that there was a difference between "information" and "attack", that while he would thank any person for acquainting him that he had a hole in his stocking or some dirt on his face, he would not feel himself obliged if that person "accompanied the information with a kick on the shin or a box on the ear." At Reed's suggestion that a common friend be designated to act as arbitrator, Ritson turned the matter over to John Baynes and endeavored to dismiss it from his mind:

"I shall dwell no longer on a subject which I would have given one of my fingers had never existed, and which for my own sake I shall endeavor as soon as possible to forget."<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup>*Quip Modest*, p. 14.

<sup>24</sup>*Letters*, I, p. 107 ff.

There is no record of Baynes's activity, but at least he failed to bring the men to a mutual understanding.

When the *Quip Modest* was published this affair was in *status quo ante*. In the Preface Ritson expressly stated that he did not hold Reed responsible for the most offensive notes in the Shakespeare edition which "that respectable gentleman" had supervised, but added, alluding no doubt to the three notes which he was unable to forgive:

"However, I doubt not there are many things in the following pages which I might have been allowed to say, without running any possible risk of giving offense to him; alive as an editor is on such occasions said to feel himself."

Ritson was himself more "alive" than perhaps any other editor of his day, and yet he seemed utterly incapable of conceiving that others might take offense at what would invariably anger him if turned against his work. The offense given, he was prompt to apologize and to express regret at what he had done. But he did this on every occasion and seemed not to profit by the experience. Reed wrote immediately, disclaiming the authorship of the notes which had displeased Ritson and voicing his surprise that their friendship had not been proof against such a misconception. The critic's reasons for his conclusions and his sincere desire to avoid a break with his friend are eloquently set forth in the following letter to Reed:

Dear Sir,

I plainly perceive that the little pamphlet I have published will be productive of a consequence which it must be evident I have sought to avoid, & for which I shall be very sorry.

That I have often thought and said that the notes at which I have taken offense could not possibly proceed from you is a fact well known. I declared my belief of it to yourself in the letter I wrote soon after the publication of your *Shakspeare*;<sup>28</sup>—you could then, I thought, so easily have undeceived me, that your silence tended to authorize & confirm my belief. I cannot however doubt the assertion you now make—but I am more and more at a loss to account for the language and manner of your notes which so far as you were personally concerned were without the least provocation on my side and could not fail to give the most unfavorable impression of my character to every one who knew who was meant by the Author of the *Remarks*. It would surely have been generous and friendly at the least to have afforded me an opportunity of defending myself against the charges you thought me liable to, before the publication of the book, that I might have had a chance of convincing you that the *Remarks* objected to were neither so false nor so foolish as they were represented. You adopted a mode of conduct which it would have been perfectly natural for me to expect from Mr. Warton or Mr. Malone but certainly not from you.

<sup>28</sup>See *Ibid.*, I, pp. 105-8.



I have no intention whatever of troubling the public with anything more upon the subject. My only wish was to justify myself which I hope I have done to the satisfaction of every unprejudiced person.

You will do me the justice to believe that I never entertained the most distant suspicion of your having any concern in the scurrilous libel you allude to<sup>26</sup>—but both Baynes & I were very much surprised to see it noticed in your list<sup>27</sup> which we concluded it would not have been if you were unacquainted with its contents, & which it was equally difficult to conceive why it shod have been if you were not.

I should consider myself a person of neither honour or honesty if I had been actuated in this publication by the least spark of resentment against you & I beg leave to assure you that notwithstanding what has passed I shall still continue to preserve the respect and esteem to which your personal character & literary services have so just a claim.

I am,

Dear Sir,

Your very obliged & obed. serv.

J Ritson.

Grays Inn,  
22d. Feb. 1788.<sup>28</sup>

If Ritson really believed that his slurs would cause the reviewers to treat him with less familiarity, he was a poor judge of human nature. If, on the other hand, he was wilfully provoking them to further assaults that he might have justification for a counter attack, he accomplished his purpose. By the critical *Reviews* the work was treated in a half humorous manner as the inconsequential production of an eccentric critic.<sup>29</sup> This much Ritson might have expected, and it is possible to conceive that he might not have felt called upon to reply to it. But the attitude of conscious superiority assumed by the reviewers added insult to injury. This he might have expected too. It was what he had before objected to, and it was just the thing that harassed him most. In his view it was beyond the pale of human possibility for any one to judge fairly, after only a casual perusal, a book which had been months, and perhaps years, in preparation. The presumptuousness of the reviewers in doing this he was bound to expose. His opportunity came in the publication of Malone's *Shakspeare* in 1790.<sup>30</sup>

After two years of preparation and delay, Ritson published a

<sup>26</sup>*A familiar Address*, etc., cited above.

<sup>27</sup>"A list of detached pieces of criticism", Reed's *Shakspeare*, Vol. I, pp. 261-6.

<sup>28</sup>The MS. of this letter is in the library of Mr. Marsden J. Perry, Providence, Rhode Island.

<sup>29</sup>*Critical Review*, Vol. LXV, p. 407; *Monthly Review*, Vol. LXXIX, p. 275.

<sup>30</sup>*The Plays and Poems of William Shakspeare in ten volumes; collated verbatim with the most authentic copies*, etc. London, 1790.

pamphlet of one hundred and four pages, entitled, *Cursory Criticisms on the Edition of Shakspeare published by Edmond Malone*. He prefixed a bitterly acrimonious letter "To the Monthly and Critical Reviewers", for the purpose, he says,

"to induce you, before you pass sentence on the following pages, to read them through: '*Strike, but hear*.'" "I consider you", he cries, "as two formidable, and mischievous gangs of nocturnal banditti, or invisible footpads, equally cowardly and malignant, who attack where there can be no defense, and assassinate or destroy where you cannot plunder. Shakspeare's morality, in the hands of a Reviewer, is to be read backward, like a witch's prayer."<sup>31</sup>

With the gentle Malone himself, Ritson was only slightly less severe than with the reviewers. He undertook the work with an avowed purpose "to convict Malone, not to convince him". And he would convict him on the following counts: with "a total want of ear and judgment"; with "replacing all the gross and palpable blunders of the first folio"; with "deforming the text, and degrading the margin with intentional corruption, flagrant misrepresentation, malignant hypercriticism, and unexampled scurrility".

Ritson recognized that he was dealing in a high-handed manner with a worthy writer and felt the necessity of finding an excuse for the violence of his language. Malone had treated Ritson with scant respect in his edition, referring to him as a "shallow or half-informed remarker", and alluding to his "profound ignorance" and "crude notions". This Ritson considered ample justification for heaping upon the editor all manner of vilification and abuse—a course which he followed with more consistency in this than in either of the earlier volumes. Although this pamphlet was directly inscribed to the reviewers, it was almost neglected by them. They recognized when a controversy had degenerated beneath the dignity of gentlemen and dismissed Ritson and his billingsgate "without feeling one spark of resentment".<sup>32</sup> But Malone had more at stake than the reviewers and was not willing to give over the contest so readily as they. A letter in the *St. James's Chronicle* for March 27, 1792, defending Malone, was probably written by himself. Magazine warfare had proved disastrous to Ritson, from the mere

<sup>31</sup>Cf. Dr. John Brown's characterization of the reviewers as "two notorious gangs of monthly and critical book-thieves hackneyed in the ways of wickedness, who, in the rage of hunger and malice, first plunder, and then abuse, maim, or murder, every honest author who is possessed of aught worth their carrying off; yet by skulking among other vermin in cellars and garrets, keep their persons tolerably well out of sight, and thus escape the hands of literary justice." *An Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times*. London, 1758. Vol. II, p. 75.

<sup>32</sup>*Critical Review*, Ser. 2, Vol. IV, p. 476; *Monthly Review*, Vol. XCIII, p. 111.

superiority of the enemy's numbers if for no other reason, and he prudently refrained from replying to the letter. This article did not fully satisfy Malone's purpose, however, and the next month he published *A Letter to Richard Farmer, relative to the edition of Shakspeare, published in 1790, and some Criticisms on that work*, in which he vindicated his own care and industry, but failed to establish his reputation for metrical judgment.<sup>83</sup>

It is to Ritson's credit that he made no public reply to Malone's letters. He did, however, write boastingly to his friend Robert Harrison, apropos of *Cursory Criticisms* and Malone's *Letter*:

"I flatter myself I have totally demolished the great Malone. He has attempted to answer it [*Cursory Criticisms*] by the most contemptible thing in nature."<sup>84</sup>

But Ritson did not condemn everything that Malone wrote, nor was he always so sanguine of his success in "demolishing" him. He was far from insensible to Malone's merit, and he was not unwilling to give credit where credit was due. As in many other instances, when the heat of the contest had passed over, when his anger had had time to cool in thoughtful retrospection, he repented his rash act and sought in some way to make restitution. To his nephew, who followed blindly and doggedly in his footsteps, he wrote in 1796:

"You will do Mr. Malone a great injustice if you suppose him to be in all respects what I may have endeavored to represent him in some. In order that he may recover your more favorable opinion, let me recommend to your perusal, the discussion, in his *Prolegomena*, entitled 'Shakspeare, Ford, and Johnson', and his 'Dissertation on the three parts of King Henry Sixth' (to which I am more indebted for an acquaintance with the manner of our great dramatic poet than to any thing I ever read.)"<sup>85</sup>

<sup>83</sup>See James Prior, *The Life of Edmond Malone*, London, 1860, p. 185 ff.

<sup>84</sup>*Letters*, I, p. 215.

<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*, II, p. 122. In this same letter Ritson praised Malone's exposure of the Ireland forgeries in the following words: "His recent enquiries into the Shakspearian forgeries evinces, also, considerable industry and acuteness, and is certainly worth your reading. I do not mean to say that there was any difficulty in the subject; but it has certainly derived importance from the ignorant presumption and cullibility of certain literary aristocrats who have considerable influence upon what is called the public." From the very first Ritson maintained that Ireland's "discovery" was a forgery concocted since the publication of Malone's *Shakspeare* by some person "of genius and talents which ought to have been better employed." See *Letters*, II, pp. 75, 91-93, 140, 143, and *Lit. Illust.*, VII, p. 9. Ritson was one of the earliest visitors to the exhibit arranged by the elder Ireland on Norfolk Street, and the impostor himself later confessed that he had difficulty in maintaining the counterfeit during the interview. He writes: "The sharp physiognomy, the

It is stated, on the authority of Nicolas,<sup>86</sup> that Ritson carried out his repentance and made good his amend by buying up and destroying all the copies of *Cursory Criticisms* that remained in the hands of his publishers, but there is no support for this statement other than the extreme scarcity of the volume.

These three slight volumes constitute Ritson's Shakespearean publications. They are all very much alike. Each one is an attack upon an editor and his work; the author's manner is almost invariably overbearing if not insolent; and he exhibits more critical ability than good manners. But the contributions to Shakespeare knowledge are by no means inconsiderable. Of these pamphlets the first is the largest and the most important. The *Remarks* contains practically all of the notes that were of real value. *Quip Modest* and *Cursory Criticisms* have few new notes and are mainly taken up with a reconsideration of those already presented. Some of them were decidedly worth defending; others were unhandsomely revived by a supersensitive author whose feelings occasionally overpowered his judgment.

The results of Ritson's Shakespeare criticisms fall into two main divisions comparable to the double effect of the *Observations*. In the first place, there is the direct reaction upon the theory and practice of editing. Ritson insisted upon a few fundamental principles, and he reiterated them so vociferously in each succeeding publication that they were more carefully heeded by future editors. Secondly, there is in these three volumes a not inconsiderable body of valuable contributions to Shakespeare knowledge. These two divisions will be taken up in order.

In the Prefaces to these volumes is to be found the first explicit statement of some of the canons of criticism by which Ritson was always guided. "The chief and fundamental business of an editor", he declared at the outstart, "is carefully to collate the original and authentic editions of his author."<sup>87</sup> Although all the editors from Rowe to Malone pro-

piercing eye, and the silent scrutiny, of Mr. Ritson, filled me with a dread I had never before experienced. His questionings were laconic, but always to the purpose. No studied flow of words could draw him from his purpose; he was not to be hoodwinked; and after satisfying his curiosity, he departed from Mr. Samuel Ireland's house, without delivering any opinion, or committing himself in the smallest circumstance. In fine, I do as firmly believe that Mr. Ritson went away fully assured that the papers were spurious, as that I have existence at this moment." *The Confessions of William Henry Ireland, etc.*, London, 1805, p. 227.

<sup>86</sup>Op. Cit., p. liii.

<sup>87</sup>For the quotations in this and the next paragraph see the Prefaces to *Remarks*, *Quip Modest*, and *Cursory Criticisms*.

fessed to have collated the old editions, Ritson maintained that no one of them had even compared the first two folios, "books indifferently common and quoted by everybody". Theobald had done more than any one else toward a careful collation of the quartos and folios, and him Ritson adjudged the best of the editors. He quarreled with Steevens for basing his text on the quartos, and with Malone for relying on the first folio. Some choice was necessary, he admitted. It was the privilege and the duty of the editor to choose one old text as a basis, but he ought to do this with a full and intimate knowledge of all the others. The folios, he maintained, were more reliable than the quartos, and of the folios the second was superior to the first. He went to great pains to assemble parallel passages from the folios to prove that Malone had, in the majority of cases, chosen the inferior reading. This point he had little difficulty in sustaining. But if Steevens was led into excesses and error by too close reliance on the quartos, and Malone on the first folio, Ritson, in his turn, exhibited the natural editorial tendency by too faithful adherence to his favorite text, the second folio. But Ritson knew both the quartos and the folios better than most of his contemporaries and from his wider knowledge was able to trace back with remarkable precision variant readings to their ultimate sources. He thus took from contemporary editors the honor for many "proposed emendations" and exerted a wholesome influence toward more careful textual collation. This influence is especially noticeable in Malone, although his unreasoning prejudice against the second folio prevented him from making his text as reliable as it might have been.<sup>38</sup>

Eighteenth century editors generally had no exalted conception of the sacredness of an author's text. They deleted, altered, or enlarged wherever they thought necessary and took no particular pains to distinguish their own work from the original. With advanced ideas of editorship, Ritson declared it his belief that an author's text was his own property, sacred and inviolable, and not to be altered in the slightest save by his own hand. The question was never, what *should* an author have written, but what *did* he write? An editor ought never to feel under the necessity of apologizing for his author; he ought simply to give the text as he found it. It was the privilege of every editor to alter the text where he deemed it necessary, but it was also his duty to designate, by some means clearly intelligible to the reader, his alteration as an alteration. On this score Ritson condemned Warton, the editors

<sup>38</sup>Malone assumed an attitude of nonchalance to Ritson, but he confessedly stood in awe of the critic's wrath, and he took special care to let it be known that he had collated diligently the 100,000 lines of Shakespeare's text. See the letter in the *Gentleman's Magazine* and the *Letter to Farmer* cited above.

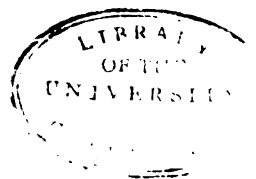
of Shakespeare, and, most of all, Bishop Percy. Although his personal opinions colored his criticisms, yet he stood true to the proper function of an editor in textual matters. Here again he exerted a salutary influence upon his century and hastened the day of "modern" editing.

These were, in a measure, criticisms of Shakespeare's editors, but their accuracy reflects the solid basis of most of the notes on the poet, especially of those not inspired by purely personal motives. The great majority of the notes were acknowledged, however grudgingly, by late eighteenth century editors, but Ritson has been all but lost sight of by modern editors, and the credit for many of his notes has gone to others.<sup>39</sup> From the citations in the following pages can be gleaned a fairly comprehensive idea of the nature of Ritson's criticisms and of their intrinsic value.

The problem of filling out the metre of certain of Shakespeare's lines was a troublesome one and gave rise to various suggestions by the commentators. To the theory of Tyrwhitt and Steevens that Shakespeare arbitrarily lengthened a word in which *l* or *r* is subjoined to another consonant, and to that of Malone that any "short" line may be properly filled out by making a dissyllable of a convenient monosyllable, Ritson was equally opposed. He immediately diagnosed Malone's case as a "total want of ear", and unmercifully castigated him for tampering with metre. Tyrwhitt's theory he ridiculed as lacking foundation in grammar and orthography. For it he wished to substitute a pet orthographical system of his own—a system based on a study of sixteenth century grammars—which he fondly believed to be the only salvation for our present "thoroughly corrupted" system of spelling. "Every verb in the English language", he declared, "gains an additional syllable by its termination in *est*, *eth*, *ed*, *ing*, or (when formed into a substantive) in *er*." The fact that Shakespeare did not seem to have been guided by this rule was sufficient reason for its rejection by all save its author. Ritson himself made an accurate forecast of its reception as the mark of its author's eccentricity when he said:

"These ideas had they been more germane to the object of these sheets, or more likely to experience a favorable reception, might have been much expanded and further pursued; but, indeed, our orthographical system is so thoroughly corrupted, and the principles and formations of the language are, even by those who have professedly treated the subject, so little investigated or understood, that a writer, hardy enough to attempt a reform, will naturally expect to find many of his

<sup>39</sup>Reed, 1785, included half the notes from *Remarks*; Malone, 1790, utilized Reed's selections as well as nearly all the new material in *Quip Modest*; Steevens, 1793, made use of practically everything in *Cursory Criticisms* in addition to the notes from the earlier volumes that had been accepted by his predecessors.



clearest axioms considered as the offspring of singularity, affectation and caprice."<sup>40</sup>

The knowledge of medieval literature which stood him in such good stead in his work with the ballads and romances Ritson used to advantage in criticisms on Shakespeare. He printed for the first time a pageant of the Nine Worthies from MS. Tanner, 407, in illustration of *Love's Labor Lost*, V. ii. 486. His familiarity with folk-lore enabled him to correct current misconceptions about "other world" creatures. In an extended debate on the mortality of fairies (*Midsummer Night's Dream*, II. i. 101) Ritson had decidedly the better of his opponents. By a wealth of allusion to Shakespeare and his contemporaries he proved that fairies in general, and Shakespeare's fairies in particular, are immortal.<sup>41</sup> He likewise corrected Johnson's misleading note on "changeling" (*Midsummer Night's Dream*, II. i. 23) by pointing out that since a fairy was speaking, "changeling" was properly used for the child taken in exchange.<sup>42</sup>

Ritson was a close and accurate student of the early forms of language, and he gave correct glosses to many words that had been misunderstood by previous commentators. In the following examples, culled at random, his glosses are supported by the *New English Dictionary* but are not credited to him in the *New Variorum Shakespeare*.

*L. L. L. I. i. 5.* "imp" means graff, slip, scion; and, by metonymy, a boy or child.<sup>43</sup>

*Mac. IV. iii. 194.* "latch" = catch, from A. S. laeccan.<sup>44</sup>

*Rich. III. II. iv. 35.* "parlous", a corruption of perilous, dangerous.<sup>45</sup>

*Ant. and Cleo. III. vi. 95.* "trull", a strumpet.<sup>46</sup>

*Cymb. V. ii. 4.* "carl", A. S. ceorl, a churl or husbandman.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>40</sup>*Remarks*, pp. 6-8; *Quip Modest*, pp. 1-6. Ritson praised Shakespeare for the broad-mindedness and liberality which made him tolerant of all parties and all creeds and enabled him to transcend the petty strife and turmoil of his day—to be not for an age but for all time. But the critic was unable to emulate the poet. Not only did he ride an orthographical hobby, but he could not avoid expressing with vigor and sometimes with virulence his personal political and religious views. See *Remarks*, pp. 66, 84, 104, 114, 124, 137, 173, 188, and *Quip Modest* and *Cursory Criticisms*, passim.

<sup>41</sup>*Remarks*, p. 43; *Quip Modest*, pp. 11-14. With a characteristic display of revengeful abuse Ritson alluded to the discomfiture of his opponents in this controversy in the "Dissertation on Fairies" prefixed to *Fairy Tales*. See Chapter VI.

<sup>42</sup>*Remarks*, p. 42.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 167.

Ritson honored Dr. Johnson for the sturdy common sense which enabled him to brush away from simple passages the mass of difficult interpretations which more artificial thinkers had placed upon them.<sup>48</sup> And this saving quality was not wholly lacking in his own criticisms. The examples which follow have been credited, in the *New Variorum* to other writers from Ritson's day down to the latter half of the nineteenth century.

*M. N. D.* II. i. 51. "aunt, in this place at least, certainly means no other than an innocent old woman."<sup>49</sup>

*M. of V.* III. iv. 72. *Por.* I could not do withal. "Could a lady of Portia's good sense, high station, and elegant manners, speak (or even think) so grossly? It is impossible. There is no hint of a bawdy or immoral meaning."<sup>50</sup>

*Lear* IV. ii. 83. *Gon.* One way I like this well. "Goneril is glad to hear of Cornwall's death, because, by her sisters, now rendered less difficult to compass, she could possess the whole kingdom."<sup>51</sup>

*R. and J.* II. vi. 14. *Fri. L.* Too swift arrives as tardy as too slow. "Alluding to the vulgar proverb: The more haste the worse speed."<sup>52</sup>

*R. and J.* III. ii. 113. That "banished", that one word "banished"  
Hath slain ten thousand Tybalts.

"I am more affected by Romeo's banishment than I should be by the death of ten thousand such relations as Tybalt."<sup>52</sup>

*Ham.* II. ii. 185. *Ham.* Conception is a blessing, but not as your daughter may conceive.

"Conception (understanding), says Hamlet, is a blessing, but the conception (pregnancy) of your daughter would not be one."<sup>53</sup>

It must be recognized that Ritson's forte was in the minutiae of criticism. He had a knowledge of details and an acquaintance with the sources of Shakespeare material that would have done credit to any commentator. He was not, however, devoid of a sympathetic appreciation of Shakespeare's characters or of each play as a whole. His notes are

<sup>48</sup>Although Boswell makes no mention of Ritson, there is more than a bare possibility that Johnson had met him personally. According to Nicolas (*Op. Cit.*, p. xxx) "a note exists from Davies, the bookseller [1782-1835], to Ritson, stating that Johnson would be glad to see him on the following day, or on the ensuing Friday; and that he, Davies, would be happy to wait on him if convenient, probably to introduce them." The note is not dated. Ritson's natural timidity would make it improbable that he sought the acquaintance of Johnson while he was preparing his first criticism on Shakespeare, and there is little reason to suppose that Johnson would have desired an acquaintance before the publication of *Remarks*.

<sup>49</sup>*Remarks*, p. 42.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 197.



interspersed with happy bits of criticism which reveal a soul responsive to the appeal of poetry. Yet it was unfortunate that he seemed to require the stimulus of a judgment with which he did not agree in order to produce his own estimate. As a result, his remarks frequently took on the nature of rebuttal, and because of their controversial flavor their sincerity was often questioned. The one shining example of Ritson's ability in the larger sweep of interpretation is his review of *Hamlet* in answer to the irreverent and unappreciative construction given by Steevens.

Steevens, in analyzing *Hamlet*, advanced the theory that the play was a study in immoral conduct and its dire consequences in a weak character. He argued that Hamlet was a youth whose faculties had been impaired by the death of his father, the loss of an expected kingship, and the sense of shame resulting from the incestuous marriage of his mother. He made but one attempt to avenge his father,—when he mistook Polonius for the king. He deliberately procured the death of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He was responsible for the distraction and death of Ophelia and outraged common decency by interrupting her funeral. And at last he killed the king to revenge himself and not his father. His own death the poet meant as a sacrifice for his immoral conduct. He is not deserving the pity of the reader or spectator because of the iniquitous means by which he finally accomplished his purpose.<sup>84</sup>

Such an interpretation was, to a worshipper of Shakespeare, nothing less than sacrilege. Ritson decried the want of reverence which Steevens had manifested and in a long review of the play justified Hamlet's conduct and contended that the poet's aim was to excite sympathy for a noble character prevented by circumstances beyond his control from accomplishing his single and unrelinquished purpose; a character deserving the pity of the audience because of his virtue, his unparalleled misfortunes, and the final sacrifice of his own life to the deed he set out to perform. He writes, in part, as follows:

"Hamlet, the onely child of the late king, upon whose death he became lawfully intituled to the crown, had, it seems, ever since that event, been in a state of melancholy, owing to excessive grief for the suddenness with which it had taken place, and an indignant horror at his mothers speedy and incestuous marriage. The spirit of the king his father appears, and makes him acquainted with the circumstances of his untimely fate, which he excites him to *revenge*: this Hamlet engages to do: an engagement it does not appear he ever forgot. . . . To conceal, and, at a convenient time, to effect, his purpose, he counterfeits madness. . . . He soon after espies the usurper at prayers, but resolves, and with great justice

<sup>84</sup>Johnson and Steevens, *Shakspeare*, 1778, Vol. X, p. 411 ff. See also Helene Richter, *Geschichte der Englischen Romantik*, Halle, 1911, Vol. I, p. 99.

resolves, not to kill him in the very moment when he might be making his peace with heaven, inasmuch as a death so timed would have been rather a happiness than a punishment, and, by no means, a proper revenge for his father's murder. . . . At the beginning of this conference [with his mother] he mistakes Polonius, who was *behind the arras*, and about to alarm the household, for the usurper, and, under that apprehension, stabs him. . . . He is, immediately, sent off to England: and, in his passage, discovers the treacherous and fatal purpose of the commission with which his companion and pretended friends were charged. These men, he knew, had eagerly solicited and even thrust themselves upon his employment; and he had, of course, sufficient reason to conclude that they were well acquainted with the nature and purport of their fatal packet. . . . His own safety depended on their removal; and, at such a time, and under such circumstances, he would have been fully justified in using any means to procure it. . . . Walking with his friend Horatio through a church yard, he enters into conversation with a grave-digger; but, presently, observing the approach of a funeral procession, he says to Horatio, to whom he was then speaking:

Soft, soft, aside. Here comes the King.  
The queen, the courtiers; *Who is this they follow?*  
*And with such maimed rites?* This doth betoken  
The corse they follow, did with desperate hand  
Foredo its own life. 'Twas of some estate.  
Couch we a while, and mark.

. . . . Laertes asking *what ceremony else?* Hamlet observes to Horatio, *That is Laertes; a very noble youth.* Laertes concluding his expostulation about the further honors with the following beautiful lines:

—lay her i' the earth;  
And from her fair and unpolluted flesh  
May violets spring!—I tell thee, churlish priest,  
A ministering angel shall *my sister* be,  
When thou liest howling;

Hamlet exclaims; *What! the fair Ophelia?* . . . . Laertes bids

—Treble woe  
Fall ten times treble on that cursed head,  
Whose wicked deed thy most ingenious sense  
Deprived thee of;

an execration Hamlet cannot but perceive to be pointed at himself. Having uttered this curse, Laertes, hastily, and in direct violation of all decorum, jumps into the grave, where he 'rants and mouths it' like a player. This outrageous proceeding seems to infect Hamlet; who, forgetting himself, as he afterward, with sorrow, owns to Horatio, and, by the 'bravery' of the others grief being worked up 'into a towering passion', leaps in after him. . . .

"The affection Hamlet now boasts for Ophelia was genuine and violent; we find him with the very same sentiments in the beginning of the play, and he has never once disowned it, except on a single occasion, when the sacrifice was required by his assumed character; a circumstance which cannot, at least ought not to, be imputed to him as a crime.

“ . . . Hamlet, in a trial of skill with Laertes, receives an unexpected, a treacherous, and mortal wound. Immediately before the company enter, he appears to be much troubled in mind; his spirits foreboding what was to happen: ‘If it be now’, says he, ‘’tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come; the readiness is all.’ . . . Being thus wounded, and on the threshold of futurity, if he had not killed the usurper immediately, the villain would have escaped unpunished. But he does not stab him for his treachery toward hisself,—he upbraids him with his crimes of incest and murder,—and consigns him to the infernal regions,

With all his ‘rank offences’ thick upon him.

So that he sufficiently revenges his father, his mother (who, by the way, dyes, if not deservedly, at least unpityed), and hisself. As to his own fall, every reader or spectator must sympathise with Horatio, for the untimely loss of a youthful prince possessed of such great and amiable qualities, rendered miserable by such unparalleled misfortunes;

—For he was likely, had he been put on,  
To have prov’d most royally;

and who falls a sacrifice to the most base and infernal machinations. His death, however, is not to be looked upon as a punishment; the most innocent, as Shakespeare well knew, are frequently confounded with the most guilty; and the virtues of Hamlet were to be rewarded among those angels which his friend Horatio invokes to escort him to everlasting rest.”<sup>55</sup>

This quotation is given because it reveals a phase of Ritson’s character all too seldom discovered and shows the eloquence he could attain to under proper stimulus. With more writing of this kind to his credit it would be unjust to say he was a man “who lived on syllables” and who was devoid of the finer sensibilities of character.

Although Ritson’s published volumes place him among Gray, Collins, Farmer, Tyrwhitt, and the other authors of detached pieces of criticism, yet he hoped to be ranked with Theobald, Johnson, Steevens, Reed, and Malone as an editor of Shakespeare. He long cherished the ambition to leave as a symbol of devotion a complete edition of “the god of his idolatry.” At least as early as 1782 he had formed the design,<sup>56</sup> but it was not announced to the public until April 18, 1783. At that time there appeared on the last page of the *Remarks* a prospectus for “An edition of the plays of William Shakspeare, with notes, *preparing for the press.*” The edition was to comprise eight duodecimo volumes; the text was to be “carefully and accurately printed from

<sup>55</sup>*Remarks*, pp. 217-224.

<sup>56</sup>When in November, 1782, Rowntree asked to borrow a *Shakespeare*, Ritson replied that his only edition was not fit to leave the chambers, but added, alluding no doubt to his own contemplated work: “twenty years hence I shall probably have it in my power to *give* you an edition of the immortal bard.” *Letters*, I, p. 63.

the only copies of real authority, the two first folios," with painstaking collation of the old quartos and an accurate statement of all variations adopted; doubtful readings were to be settled "from an attentive examination of the sentiments of every commentator"; notes were to be introduced only where they seemed absolutely necessary; the author's life and the prefaces of his various editors were to be prefixed and an accurate glossary added; and an extra volume was to contain "a complete verbal index". This edition was to be, with regard to the correctness of the text, "infinitely superior to any that has yet appeared"; it was to possess all "the advantages of every former edition, and be as little liable as possible to the defects of any".

Coming as it did upon the heels of his captious attack upon Johnson and Steevens, this announcement appeared as a challenge to Shakespeare editors. But had Ritson had the hardihood to publish at this time, he could not have met with success. When such a brilliant galaxy of commentators and editors as Johnson, Steevens, Tyrwhitt, Farmer, Reed, and Malone possessed the ear of the booksellers and the confidence of the public, an edition of Shakespeare by an antiquary who was minutely accurate in details, who held advanced notions of the functions of an editor and critic, who was uncompromising in praise and blame alike, who was, above all, pugnacious and controversial—an edition by such an one would have met with scant approval in most quarters and with open rejection in many. Ritson sensed the situation accurately. On February 1, 1788, in the preface to *Quip Modest*, he replied thus to the enquiries that had been made concerning his edition:

"In truth, the attention requisite to the publication of so voluminous a work, and the little likelihood there is of its being productive to the undertaker of anything but trouble and expense, together with other causes of less consequence, have hitherto deterred me from putting it to press. But I have neither laid aside all thoughts of bringing it forward, nor can I pledge myself to produce it in any given time. I have little reason to suppose that the Public interests itself at all in the matter, and therefore think myself at full liberty to suit my own inclination and convenience."

Following this pronouncement he made enough effort to put two sheets of *Comedy of Errors* to the press. Here the matter rested, although it is certain that he did not for some years give up his notion of eventually perfecting his edition and perhaps never entirely relinquished it. To the indifference of the public, which he felt keenly, was soon added physical illness which materially lessened the amount of his literary labor. In the middle of 1790 he wrote to Joseph Cooper Walker, the antiquary:

"I know not whether I shall ever have resolution enough to put an edition

of this favorite author into the press, as the public will for some time be completely glutted with editions of one kind or another."<sup>57</sup>

Two years later he was still gathering material and declared that he had yet "some intention of printing an edition of Shakspeare."<sup>58</sup>

Indeed he was, throughout life, making notes, exchanging suggestions with friends, and amassing material for an edition of the dramatist. Although only the three pamphlets already reviewed were published, yet much more was prepared. The catalogue of the sale of Ritson's library records the ten volumes of the Johnson and Steevens *Shakspeare* and the four volumes of *Shakspeare's Twenty Plays*, by Steevens, as "filled with MS. notes and comments by Mr. Ritson." In addition, there were three volumes of manuscript material "prepared by Mr. Ritson for the press, intending to publish it."<sup>59</sup>

With the exception of twenty-three pages of variant readings,<sup>60</sup> all this material—the painstaking accumulation of a lifetime—has disappeared from view. Had he published his material in final form, Ritson's edition of Shakespeare would undoubtedly have compared favorably with any of his century. He had a knowledge of the quartos and folios not surpassed by any of his contemporaries and a capacity for taking pains not equalled by any. He had a better ear than Malone, more reverence for his author than Steevens, and a finer critical insight than Reed. He would have laid under tribute a vast knowledge of medieval literature and a wide acquaintance with the English language in its early forms. His glossary and verbal index would probably have been the most valuable parts of his edition, for he long complained of Ayscough's *Index*, and he had consistently corrected the glosses of previous editions. The most likely fault of his work would have been the outcropping of the acidity of his nature in personal abuse of fellow editors.—But this is speculation. Unless the lost manuscripts are by

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 168.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 215.

<sup>59</sup>At the Ritson sale Longman purchased "for the trade" the annotated Johnson and Steevens *Shakspeare* and the three volume manuscript of Ritson's notes. It is not known why he did not publish the material. In 1824 Haslewood waxed indignant at what he called the "singular apathy or inconsistency of the bibliopolitical monopolizers" and professed to believe that a conspiracy to defame Ritson existed even after his death. (*Op. Cit.*, p. 44.) But the publishers probably acted on purely commercial considerations. This material was disposed of at Longman's sale in 1842 and has not been located since.

<sup>60</sup>These pages, now in the library of Mr. Perry, contain 159 parallel passages from the two first folios compiled in the endeavor to convict Malone of adopting all the "gross and palpable errors of the first folio". Seventeen of them were printed in the Introduction to *Cursory Criticisms*.

good fortune discovered, Ritson's fame as a Shakespeare commentator must rest upon the *Remarks, Quip Modest, and Cursory Criticisms*. Making due allowance for an unhappy manner, this reputation is by no means the least of the eighteenth century.

## CHAPTER V.

### EDITORIAL LABORS, 1783-1795

First period as an editor and collector—*English Songs*—Makes strong appeal for popular favor—Emphasizes editorial accuracy—Manifests interest in literary antiquities of Stockton by publishing *Bishoprick Garland* and *Gammer Gurton's Garland*—Publishes *Spartan Manual* for nephew—*Yorkshire Garland*—Correspondence with Walker—Illness—*Ancient Songs*—Its general character—Appeal to critical student—Glossary—*Ancient Popular Poetry*—Contents—Preface—Revises Reed's *Dido*—*North-Country Chorister*—*Northumberland Garland*—*English Anthology*—Plan—Appeal for public favor—Abuse of reviewers—Transcribes Hodgson's *Memoirs*—*Scotish Songs*—Labor in compiling—Contents—Critical reception—*Minot's Poems*—First critical edition—Date of MS.—Minot's personality and literary rank—*Robin Hood*—The Life—The Poems—Critical estimate.

With the publication of the *Observations*, in 1782, Ritson's literary career may be said to have begun. From that time on to the close of his life he was known to his contemporaries as an editor and a critic rather than as a conveyancer. As has already been indicated, he continued in his profession and devoted enough attention to it not only to gain a livelihood but also to publish some valuable professional books of an antiquarian nature, but his serious concern with the law decreased in proportion as his purely literary interests increased. In literature his work is primarily that of an editor, secondarily that of a critic. His editorial labors fall naturally into two periods determined by the insecure state of his health. The first extends to 1795 when a nervous ailment became so severe as to put a temporary stop to his work. During the years 1785 to 1795 he saw through the press twenty publications totalling twenty-six volumes. Of these, six titles have already been considered. The others remain for treatment in the present chapter. With three exceptions these volumes consist of collections of poems, ballads, and songs of a somewhat popular type. Several of them contain introductory essays of an historical and critical nature. For the most part this material will be reserved for discussion in the next chapter but one. We are here concerned with the edited matter only.

Besides his first Shakespeare pamphlet, Ritson published in 1783<sup>1</sup> *A Select Collection of English Songs, with their Original Airs*, in three

<sup>1</sup>Allibone, Op. Cit., credits Ritson with the continuation of Ben Jonson's *Sad Shepherd, or a Tale of Robin Hood*, published anonymously in 1783 under the title, *An attempt to continue and complete the justly admired Pastoral of the Sad*

volumes.<sup>2</sup> One is immediately struck with the typographical elegance of this collection. It is delightfully printed. There is an excellent frontispiece by the Swiss artist Fuseli,<sup>3</sup> and scattered throughout the volumes are several pleasing vignettes by Stothard.<sup>4</sup> Ritson was exceedingly vain of the mechanical appearance of his publications and prided himself on their typographical finish almost as much as on their critical accuracy. He wrote to a friend that his books were "not without some merit as an example of the printer's art", and he was always pleased when the format of his work was praised. The fact that he went to great expense in illustrating his publications and in printing them in superior style (a part of several editions was printed "on fine paper") made it impossible for him to realize anything from their sale. He frequently complained that all his publications except the little *Garlands* were a drain on his purse, but it seems never to have occurred to him that he might have lost less money on his publications if he had allowed the printer to bring them forth in an equally substantial but less elegant dress. In fact, this very insistence upon superior typography, coupled with his haphazard business methods, led frequently through misunderstandings to disrupted friendships.<sup>5</sup> In *English Songs* the use of musical type added to the difficulties of publication. Musical printing did not develop as rapidly in England as on the continent,<sup>6</sup> and at that time there was but one printer in the kingdom who possessed a sufficient quantity of musical type for this work and those were all of equal size and character.<sup>7</sup>

*Shepherd*. This is the work of Francis G. Waldron (1744-1818). See *Ben Jonson's Sad Shepherd with Waldron's Continuation*, edited by W. W. Greg as vol. xi. of *Materialism sur Kunde des alteren Englischen Dramas*, Louvain, 1905.

<sup>2</sup>References are to the second edition "with additional songs and occasional notes" by Thomas Park, 3 vols., London, 1813.

<sup>3</sup>Henry Fuseli (1741-1825), Swiss painter, spent practically the whole of his life in England. As an artist he had many things in common with Reynolds and Blake. His most noteworthy paintings are perhaps his Shakespeare and Milton productions. It was through his intimacy with Joseph Johnson, bookseller of St. Paul's Churchyard, that he designed the frontispiece for Ritson's *English Songs*.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas Stothard (1755-1834) is famous chiefly as a book-illustrator. His long friendship with Blake was terminated as a result of Cromek's clandestine dealings concerning the painting of the "Canterbury Pilgrims."

<sup>5</sup>In this regard *English Songs* took its toll in the friendship of Christopher, Ritson's Stockton bookseller. See *Letters*, I, pp. 111-113.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Robert Steele, *The Earliest English Music Printing*, London, 1903; *Encyc. Brit.*, art. "Typography".

<sup>7</sup>As late as 1813, Park says it was necessary to cast the type twice for musical notes, and even then the second font was quite defective in blending the ligatures of the notes. *English Songs*, I, p. xvii, note.



The excellence of the printer's workmanship is, however, quite in keeping with the editor's ideals in forming the collection of *English Songs*. In the Preface Ritson justifies his work on high moral grounds. Previous song collections in the eighteenth century were filled with coarse and immoral material. D'Urfey's famous and popular six volume "singing book"<sup>8</sup> was notoriously vulgar and immodest, and although D'Urfey intended the songs to be sung by the youth of both sexes he saw no necessity for apologizing for the impudicity of the pieces. Collectors after him, from Ramsay to Aikin,<sup>9</sup> called attention to the chastity of their volumes, and while the collections are far from pure when judged by present day standards, the men were justified in congratulating themselves on their service to morality when they remembered that the public had once been delighted with the obscenity which D'Urfey had foisted upon them. But of all these men Aikin was the only one who approached with any degree of proximity the ideal which they exalted in their prefaces. Ritson was outspoken in his disapproval on moral grounds of previous song collections, and he aimed rigidly to correct their faults on this score by excluding from his own collection "every composition, however celebrated, or however excellent, of which the slightest expression, or the most distant allusion could have tinged the cheek of delicacy, or offended the purity of the chastest ear"<sup>10</sup> In this endeavor Ritson succeeded better than any of his predecessors and for his achievement received the unalloyed praise of his contemporaries. In some other exclusions he was not so fortunate. These strictures were in some cases the result of purely personal dislikes. Such is the exclusion of songs on Freemasonry, those "absurd, conceited, enigmatic, and unintelligible" compositions which "seemed calculated rather to disgrace than to embellish the collection." Others are the result of sweeping and rather hasty generalizations; as when he says that the insertion of songs on political topics has been studiously avoided because "the best of these pieces are not only too temporary, but too partial to gain applause when their subjects are forgotten, and their satire has lost its force."<sup>11</sup> This criticism would apply to most but by no means all political songs.

Quite different from the point of view in his earlier publications, which were aimed primarily for the student and antiquary, is that taken

<sup>8</sup>Thomas D'Urfey, *Wit and Mirth; or Pills to Purge Melancholy*, London, 1719-20.

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Allan Ramsay, *Tea-table Miscellany* and *The Evergreen*, London, 1724; William Thomson, *Orpheus Caledonius*, 1725; Benjamin Wakefield, *Warbling Muses*, 1749; Edward Capell, *Prolusions*, 1760; John Aikin, *Essays on Song Writing*, 1772 and 1774.

<sup>10</sup>*English Songs*, Preface, p. vii.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. x.

in the Preface to *English Songs*. There he makes a strong bid for popular favor. Like all preceding collectors he apologizes for the old popular songs which he feels obliged to include, and flatters the refined taste of his polished age. He deferentially explains that the old ballads which form the last section of his collection "would by no means assimilate or mix with the more polished contents of the preceding divisions" and tells the reader that "he must be content to take them, as they were probably written,—at least, as they have come down to us,—with all their imperfections on their heads."<sup>12</sup>

The omissions already noted were a part of his appeal for public approval. There were others. Those who look in this collection for extracts from the vast manuscript stores with which Ritson was familiar will be disappointed. While he professed acquaintance with a "prodigious quantity" of unpublished lyric poetry, he confidently assured his readers that every piece before them had already appeared in print. "The editor", he writes, "could not, consistently with his respect for the public, obtrude upon them a single line, which had not been already stamped with their approbation, or on the merits of which they had not had an opportunity to decide."<sup>13</sup>

A still further plea for general approbation was made by playing upon the chord of patriotism, by appealing to the national spirit. Ritson deprecated the "fashionable rage for music" which caused the people of his day to forsake the old songs and ancient ballads and turn to the ephemeral tunes of the second-rate play houses. In this he was seconding an earlier opinion of Dr. Aikin, who characterized the tendency of the times in this wise: "the most enchanting tunes are suited with the most flat and wretched combinations of words that ever disgraced the genius of a nation; and the miserable versifier only appears as the hired underling of a musical composer."<sup>14</sup> As an antidote to this "popular" music Ritson advocated a return to the old songs whose simple melodies served only to enhance the sentiment of the words.<sup>15</sup> This was his chief

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. xiii.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. xi.

<sup>14</sup>John Aikin, *Op. Cit.*, 2nd edition, Preface, p. vi.

<sup>15</sup>More than a decade earlier (1769) Benjamin Franklin, then in London, had expressed the same idea in a letter to Peter Franklin, who had sent him a song to be set to music by one of the London composers. After expressing the opinion that some Massachusetts country girl who had heard nothing but "Chevy Chase" and "The Children in the Woods" and had naturally a good ear "might more probably have made a pleasing popular tune than any of our masters here [London]", he adds of the modern composers: "they are admirable at pleasing practised ears, and know how to delight one another; but, in composing for songs, the reigning taste seems to be quite out of nature, or rather the reverse of nature,

reason for adding in the last part of his collection the old ballads which he called the "genuine effusions of the English muse, unadulterated with the sentimental refinements of Italy or France." He professed to be rendering a distinctly national service by including in his collection the genuine ancient songs of the English, while he ignored the "mushroom growth of comic operas" which the recent "fashionable rage" for French and Italian music had caused to spring up in England.<sup>16</sup>

Ritson sought further to curry popular favor by the simplicity and naturalness of the arrangement of the songs. One of his chief reasons for venturing to add another to the already numerous collections of somewhat similar nature was that he would present on an improved plan and within brief compass the best lyrics in the English language, which otherwise had to be sought through a large number of volumes and mixed with a mass of other material. He expressed the idea in characteristically trenchant language thus:

"For who, let his desires and his convenience be what they may, will think it worth his while to peruse, much less to purchase, two or three hundred volumes, merely because each of them may happen to contain a couple of excellent songs? Everyone who wishes to possess a pearl, is not content to seek it in an ocean of mud".<sup>17</sup>

The pearls being now brought together, the question was to arrange them for the most effective display. This Ritson considered to be the most natural and simple from the reader's point of view, and he disclaimed any desire for personal commendation for an "ingenious" arrangement.

As classification presupposes definition, Ritson's first task was to define song and distinguish song from ballad.

"Song, in its most general acceptation, is defined to be the expression of a sentiment, sensation or image, the description of an action, or the narrative of an event, by words differently measured, and attached to certain sounds, which we call melody or tune."<sup>18</sup>

On the basis of this general definition Ritson made a division into "songs strictly and properly so called" and "ballads or mere narrative composition and yet like a torrent, hurries them all away with it; one or two perhaps only excepted." *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. A. H. Smyth, New York and London, 1906. Vol. V, p. 529.

<sup>16</sup>The purely English character of the collection is further enhanced by rejecting almost all Irish songs and by rigidly excluding Scottish productions. A further reason for the last omission is to be found in the fact that Ritson was planning a separate collection of "songs entirely Scottish."

<sup>17</sup>*Eng. Songs*, Pref., p. ii. Aikin considered the business of classifying a disagreeable task, but Ritson professes to take pleasure in it.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, Historical Essay, p. i.

sitions." This distinction was here for the first time clearly made, and it had a wholesome effect in clarifying later discussions on the whole ballad and song question. The songs in the confined sense form the first three divisions of *English Songs*, ballads the fourth.

The first and principal division, "Love Songs", is subdivided into five classes, each with its characteristic theme. This part of the work is a veritable store-house of song. It comprises pieces from authors ranging in time from Marlowe and Raleigh to Dr. Johnson, and in poetic merit running the gamut from Barton Booth and Sir William Yonge to Shakespeare. The second division consists of half a hundred pieces unfortunately designated "Drinking Songs". It was the excess of Bacchanalian verses, with their attendant licentiousness, freedom, and immorality, that had disgraced previous song collections in Ritson's eyes. In making his own selection he considered that he had performed a commendable service for his generation, for he had carefully excluded every piece that might give offense to the most refined. If Ritson erred here, it was in that his enthusiasm for morality led him to excessive strictures. Into a third division, "Miscellaneous Songs", are thrown all those pieces of poetic merit which a strict observance of his classification had excluded from the foregoing sections. It includes some of the most delightful songs in the whole collection. After these three groups of songs follows a comparatively small number of old popular ballads. The third volume of the collection is devoted to the musical notation of the songs contained in the other two volumes. In this part of the work Ritson experienced peculiar difficulty, for, by his own confession, his knowledge of music was quite limited. This handicap was, however, largely overcome through the generous assistance of his old Stockton friend, William Shield.<sup>19</sup>

In the preface to *English Songs* there is a curious mingling of two ideals which in the eighteenth century had seemed incompatible. Not only does Ritson make a strong plea for the favor of the popular reader, the person who wishes to receive a little instruction and more amusement, the "man of taste", but he places much emphasis on fidelity to sources and accuracy in editing. The songs are all published from the best edition of the author's works or from some other reliable source

<sup>19</sup>Ritson made no attempt to give any music further than a simple treble. He apologizes to "such fair readers as may complain of the want of a bass part for their harpsichords" by saying that it was impracticable to complicate the musical notation to such a degree. An amusing side-light on this explanation is afforded by Park's statement that he once heard "a lady of high musical repute inquire whether a *bass* had been printed with the airs of his *English Songs*, to which the editor replied, "A bass! what would you have a bass for?—to spoil the treble?" *English Songs*, Pref., p. xv, and note.

and corrected by a careful collation of all available authentic copies. He is careful to point out that all variations adopted are indicated in the notes. It is in the last section of the work, however, that Ritson has most to say about this point, and here began a quarrel with Percy's editorial methods which he carried on with increasing vigor for the remainder of his life. In this part of the preface he seems to have forgotten the man of taste, for the moment at least, and to have in mind only the critical student and the antiquarian.

Each of the ballads included in this work Ritson says "has been transcribed from some old copy, generally in black letter; and has, in most cases, been collated with various others." He has kept closely to his originals, varying the text only so far as to modernize the spelling—a slight concession to the man of taste—and to correct obvious typographical errors. Half of the twenty-eight ballads included had been previously printed by Percy in the *Reliques*, a work which Ritson commended as "beautiful, elegant, and ingenious". But the elegance of the publication did not blind him to Percy's editorial laxness, nor was it sufficient to stop up the vials of his wrath, which had not been emptied on Warton, Steevens, et al. In preparing his own collection Ritson had had frequent recourse to the originals from which Percy had professedly printed the ballads, "but not one", he says, "has upon examination, been found to be followed with either fidelity or correctness," and they who look into the *Reliques* "to be acquainted with the state of ancient poetry, will be miserably disappointed or fatally misled." And then, led on by his animosity to editorial carelessness he indulges in a bitter personal thrust at Percy.

"Forgery and imposition of every kind, ought to be universally execrated, and never more than when employed by persons high in rank or character, and those very circumstances are made use of to sanctify the deceit."<sup>20</sup>

A comparison of the texts printed by Percy and Ritson with those given in Child's monumental collection<sup>21</sup> proves Ritson to be far superior to his celebrated contemporary in accuracy and fidelity to originals. Allowing, then, for a warmth of expression which was perfectly natural to Ritson, his judgment that "the inaccurate and sophisticated manner in which every thing that had real pretensions to antiquity, has been printed" by Percy "would be a sufficient apology for any one who might undertake to publish, more faithful, though, haply, less elegant copies",

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. xii, note.

<sup>21</sup>F. J. Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, Boston, 1882. Of the fourteen ballads given in common by Percy and Ritson ten are printed by Child.

is not much afield so far as the strict requirements of editorial accuracy go.

These same rigid canons of editorship Ritson carried into his work with the music of the songs. He insisted, first of all, upon the original air for each song. A large number of the old airs had, of course, been forgotten and were irrevocably lost. Of those that were known, many were faulty and had to be rearranged. In all cases there was the problem of harmonizing the words and music. Here it was Ritson's somewhat revolutionary demand that the music should be made to fit the words of the song, not vice versa. Two composers who incurred his condemnation for the opposite practice were Dr. Arne,<sup>22</sup> "whose own professional excellence might have taught him the respect due that of another", and William Jackson of Exeter,<sup>23</sup> "who has gone so far as to prefix to one of his publications a formal defense of the freedom he had exercised upon the unfortunate bards who have fallen into his clutches." In his aversion to altering the original tunes Ritson was fortunately supported by Shield, who wrote to him:

"I feel very differently from many of my brother professors, for although practise must improve my harmonical knowledge, it does not lessen the value of a simple national melody, which I hope will ever be admired by every sensible mind."<sup>24</sup>

Ritson's diverse aims in collecting and publishing *English Songs* are well summarized in a sentence in the Preface:

"Entirely to remove every objection to which the subject is, at present, open; to exhibit all the most admired, and intrinsically excellent specimens of lyric poetry in the English language at one view; to promote real instructive entertainment; to satisfy the critical taste of the judicious; to indulge the nobler feelings of the pensive; and to afford innocent mirth to the gay; has been the complex object of the present publication."<sup>25</sup>

How well he succeeded in the accomplishment of this manifold object is attested by the almost universal commendation with which the collection was received. Even his quondam enemies, the reviewers, took but passing notice of the harsh treatment of Percy and gave unstinted praise to the work as a whole.<sup>26</sup> He seems to have succeeded remarkably well in

<sup>22</sup>Thomas Augustine Arne (1710-1778), musical composer and teacher, supplied the music for Covent Garden and Drury Lane for many years. His two most notable triumphs are "Rule Britannia", and "Where the Bee Sucks."

<sup>23</sup>William Jackson, of Exeter, (1730-1803) was a musical composer, and author of numerous volumes of songs and many musical text books.

<sup>24</sup>Quoted by Nicolas, *Op. Cit.*, p. xxxiv.

<sup>25</sup>*English Songs*, Pref., p. ii.

<sup>26</sup>See *Critical Review*, Vol. LVIII, pp. 300-4; *Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. LIV, pp. 817-18; *Monthly Review*, Vol. LXXIII, p. 234; and for the second edition,

pleasing both the student and the general reader; and he was fortunate in striking a period when the public was much interested in collections of songs, ballads, poems, and romances. This interest joined with Ritson's absorption in poetic antiquities to keep him working and publishing in this field. He seldom gave up working on a book when it had been issued from the press. Instead he immediately set about correcting and altering with an eye to a new edition. The suggestions of friends were always gratefully received, and he undoubtedly profited by hostile criticism although he made anything but grateful acknowledgment of it. A new edition of *English Songs* was contemplated and some progress made in its execution,<sup>27</sup> but the press of other work caused him to defer its publication until too late.

Ritson's immediate interest at this time centered for the moment in the literary antiquities of Stockton and its vicinity. The attention which he had earlier paid to the topographical antiquities of the north was diverted, with the general directing of his aims to literature, to its poetical remains. It may be merely a coincidence, but at this time and at each future period when he published poems of the north his attention was directed there by some special development in his non-literary interests. Just now his sister was in the illness which he mistakenly judged to be her last, and he was especially concerned for the future of her son, Joseph Frank. It may be that visits to Stockton because of family matters incited him to publish the material which he had been for some time collecting. In 1784 he published at Stockton, *The Bishoprick Garland; or Durham Minstrel: a Choice Collection of Excellent Songs*. This is a collection of sixteen northern provincial ballads<sup>28</sup> of interest mainly to residents of Durham county and to antiquaries. About this same period was issued at Stockton an anthology of nursery rhymes with the title, *Gammer Gurton's Garland, or The Nursery Parnassus*. Further collections of similar nature appeared at infrequent intervals.

It is highly probable that the special concern which Ritson felt for the proper guidance of his youthful nephew led him to publish, in 1785,<sup>29</sup> *The Spartan Manual, or Tablet of Morality: being a genuine Collection of*

*Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. LXXXIII, p. 223; and *British Critic*, Vol. CLIII, pp. 153-9.

<sup>27</sup>*Letters*, II, p. 109.

<sup>28</sup>Ritson asked Harrison to suggest "alterations or remarks for the improvement of a second edition" (*Letters*, I, p. 110) which appeared in 1792 with six songs omitted. Two new ones were later added, and all eighteen were printed in the next edition.

<sup>29</sup>In 1785 was printed *The Caledonian Muse*, a collection of Scottish poetry, but it was not published until many years later. It will be considered in the next chapter.

*the Apophthegms, Maxims, and Precepts of the Philosophers, Heroes, and other great and celebrated Characters of Antiquity: under proper heads. For the improvement of Youth, and the promotion of Wisdom and Virtue.* The expression in the title, "for the improvement of youth", his anxiety to supply Frank with a copy,<sup>30</sup> and certain comments in the Preface<sup>31</sup> seem to indicate that the collection was prepared especially for his nephew. But if this is true, it did not prevent him from performing his task scientifically. He furnished an alphabetical table of the names, nationalities, and dates of the men whose words were quoted and supplied each quotation with the name of the author. The compilation is obviously designed for the desultory reader, and although it is a credit to the extent and care of the editor's reading among the ancient classics, it could not be expected to attract wide attention.<sup>32</sup> The most interesting thing about it is the light it throws on Ritson's commendable desire to inoculate sound morality in the hearts of youth.

Since 1784 Ritson had been continuing his work on the Garlands. During this period nearly all of his summer vacations were spent in the north and much of his time while there was devoted to collecting songs from oral tradition and from literary friends interested in their preservation.<sup>33</sup> His third collection, *The Yorkshire Garland; being a curious collection of old and new songs concerning that famous county*, appeared in 1788.<sup>34</sup> This is a small pamphlet containing half a dozen local songs.

<sup>30</sup>Letters, I, p. 101.

<sup>31</sup>Spartan Manual, Pref., pp. viii-ix.

<sup>32</sup>The reviews were brief but commendatory. See *Monthly Review*, Vol. LXXII, p. 235; *Critical Review*, Vol. LIX, p. 398.

<sup>33</sup>Letters, I, pp. 73-138, *passim*.

<sup>34</sup>In 1788 also appeared *Homer's Hymn to Venus, translated from the Greek, with notes by I. Ritson*. The *Gentleman's Magazine* attributed this work to Joseph Ritson (Vol. LIX, p. 539) and included it in the list of his publications appended to the obituary notice (Vol. LXXIII, p. 987). This same mistake was made by Nichols and later corrected (*Lit. Anec.* VIII, pp. xii, 135, note.) The real translator was Isaac Ritson (1761-1789), a native of Scotland who supported himself in London by writing medical articles for the *Monthly Review*. Joseph Ritson left the following note in his copy of the *Hymn*: "This Isaac Ritson, a lame man, who walked with a crutch, was, for sometime schoolmaster at Penrith; but ambition haveing induce'd him to study physick, and adopting the principles and practise of Doctor Thomas Brown, he addicted hisself so much to that worthy physician's universal specifick—a glass of brandy, that he fel sick, went mad, and dye'd in the neighbourhood of London. Poor Isaac! thou should'st have remember'd the fate of Old Cole's dog, which was determine'd to take the wall of a wagon, and was crushed to death for his presumption. J. R." Quoted by Haslewood, *Op. Cit.*, p. 14, note.



Ritson's publications of songs and ballads, and especially the *Garlands*, served to attract the favorable notice of the Irish antiquary, Joseph Cooper Walker, who made commendatory mention of his work in the *Memoirs of the Irish Bards*. Ritson made a brief stop at Dublin on his way to the north during his vacation in 1789 for the purpose of picking up native songs but says that he "met with little or nothing except disappointment."<sup>35</sup> Shortly after this began a correspondence with Walker which was continued to the end of his life. Despite Ritson's disparaging note on the Irish in *English Songs*<sup>36</sup> and his unabating scorn of the natives of the island, he and Walker continued in a friendly way to exchange ideas on all manner of antiquarian topics. Their early interest was in Irish songs. Walker seemed a little jealous of Ritson's activity in collecting the songs but was appeased when informed by Ritson that he would never attempt to publish them, as "it would be the extreme of arrogance in me to attempt a work for which no one can be less qualified."

Collecting Irish songs which he did not intend to publish was hardly more than a diversion, however. Ritson had more serious projects in hand, and they soon began to materialize in printed form. A nervous illness which he says must have been stealing on him for years now became so distressing as to hinder his work and to find a place in most of his letters. The first mention of it occurs in a letter to Harrison in 1790 when he says:

"I am become so nervous, as they call it, that I have very seldom either resolution or capacity to write the shortest note on the most trivial occasion. Anything beyond a mere letter of business is attended with so much trouble and difficulty as to make me eagerly lay hold of any trifling pretext to put it off *till the next day*."<sup>37</sup>

But although this illness constantly increased in severity, it did not effectively cut off his active work of publication for half a decade, and during this period he seemed to be spurred to increased efforts by the realization that his work would soon be stopped.

In 1787 he had completed and printed a collection of early songs under the title, *Ancient Songs, from the time of King Henry III to the Revolution*. For some unaccountable reason the publication of this volume was delayed until 1792 when it appeared bearing on the title page the date 1790, the year in which it must have been originally intended to be published. This was Ritson's second important contri-

<sup>35</sup>*Letters*, I, p. 151.

<sup>36</sup>*English Songs*, Pref., p. ix, note.

<sup>37</sup>*Letters*, I, p. 162.

bution to the awakening interest in early and modern poetry which had received its signal impetus from the publication of Percy's *Reliques* and which was constantly fed by collections of songs and ballads, editions of the poets both separate and collected, and researches into the ancient literature of the English and neighboring peoples, from the *Ancient and Modern Songs of Herd* to Ellis's *Specimens of the Early English Poets*.

As the title of this collection indicates, *Ancient Songs* covers the period from the reign of Henry III to the Revolution. By bringing together the best songs and lyric productions of this period Ritson hoped to illustrate national history and to exhibit to his own generation the idealized manners and splendid traditions of a virile though perhaps a crude past.<sup>88</sup> In order the better to accomplish his end he arranged the songs in five classes on chronological considerations, a plan previously approximated in the *Reliques* and later adopted by Ellis and Southey in their *Specimens*.<sup>89</sup> The songs consist of old English lyric fragments like "The Cuckoo Song", stirring battle songs like "Flodden Field", delightful old carols, and love songs from the recognized poets of the later periods. It was not until the second edition, 1829, that the collection became rich in genuine ballads; at that time a number of pieces were added to Class four and the material was enlarged to two volumes.

Ritson's object in compiling *Ancient Songs* was somewhat different from that in *English Songs*. Although here he placed more emphasis on the appeal to the critical student, yet he made conscious effort to attract the general reader. This is seen in the typographical elegance of the work—scarcely less noticeable than in *English Songs*—and in the excellent vignettes by Stothard which stand at the beginning and end of each class. To offset these advantageous qualities, however, was an unfortunate error of judgment on the editor's part which militated against the popularity of his work. Ritson's veneration for the relics of antiquity and his desire to transmit the songs exactly as he found them induced him to print the earliest pieces with Anglo-Saxon characters and even the later ones with obsolete spelling. He soon came to feel that such scrupulous fidelity to the mechanical form of his originals was not de-

<sup>88</sup>Ritson was always interested in reconstructing the private as well as the national life of the past. See his commendation of LeGrand's *Vie privée des Français*, and his suggestion for a similar treatment of the ancient Irish. *Letters*, I, p. 143.

<sup>89</sup>When Park states that Ritson meant to conform his *Ancient Songs* to the *Specimens* of Ellis, "in the hope of obtaining for it poetic popularity", he overlooks the fact that Ritson's work was printed three years before that of Ellis appeared. See *English Songs*, I, p. xcv.

manded by even the most rigid canons of editorship, and he saw immediately that the sale of his work was impeded by the antique air which these innovations gave to it. In preparing the manuscript for a new edition he discarded both these disguises, and with it his work lost much of its forbidding aspect.<sup>40</sup>

That Ritson was more deeply concerned with satisfying the critical reader than the man of taste is evident from a number of considerations. Here as everywhere else he was scrupulously careful in textual matters. Of the eighty-eight pieces in the first edition, fifty-four had previously appeared in print—some of them in black letter and some in book form. The remaining thirty-four are printed for the first time and are here rescued from the oblivion of manuscripts in various public libraries and in his own private collection. In some instances Ritson was able to correct the errors of former editors and historians<sup>41</sup> and in others to afford more exact copies than had previously been available.<sup>42</sup> He did most of the transcribing himself and so avoided the errors which nearly always result from having material of this sort pass through a third hand. His only deviation from this rule was in the case of songs in foreign tongues. In transcribing for the second edition the Latin "Drinking Ode" of Walter Mapes, and the French ballads "On King Richard I", "On the death of Simon de Montfort", and "The Recollections of Châtelain", he had the assistance of such friends as Ellis and Scott.<sup>43</sup>

Prefixed to the songs are two critical dissertations which are a further concession to the antiquarian reader. Ritson was most at home in the Middle Ages, and in these dissertations "On the Ancient English Minstrels" and "On the Songs, Music, and Vocal and Instrumental Performance of the Ancient English" his critical faculties are shown to highest advantage; antiquarian erudition, elaborate research, and indefatigable care appear on every hand. Ritson was more veracious than Percy and more industrious than Warton, and he only fell short of the

<sup>40</sup>Park says that the manuscript for a second edition of *Ancient Songs* was "totally destroyed at the morbid close of Ritson's life" (*English Songs*, I, p. xc, note; II, p. 380, note.) This is an error. The second edition with the title altered to *Ancient Songs and Ballads, from the reign of Henry II to the Revolution* was published in two volumes, London, 1829, from the two volume manuscript in Ritson's hand which is now in the library of Mr. Perry.

<sup>41</sup>Sir John Hawkins, *History of Music*, London, 1776, Vol. II, p. 93, followed by Burney and Warton, dated the "Cuckoo Song" about the middle of the fifteenth century. Ritson puts the MS. "as early (at least) as 1250." *Ancient Songs*, p. 2.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 88, 137.

<sup>43</sup>See *English Songs*, II, p. 380 ff.; *Letters*, II, p. 231; and second edition of *Ancient Songs*.

erudition of Tyrwhitt. To combine these elements with advanced standards of editorship was as unusual in the eighteenth century as it was fortunate for the next, and the errors into which Ritson slipped were due to the limitations under which every literary pioneer labors.

The final evidence of Ritson's endeavor to please the critical student is his attempt to furnish his collection with a glossary. The study of Anglo-Saxon was then in its infancy, and Ritson had at his disposal only a few books which would aid him in glossing these early poems. He confessed regret at his inability to render the glossary more perfect and in the second edition made ample reparation for any shortcomings that may have been noticed in the first.

*Ancient Songs* is undoubtedly the most interesting and in many ways the most valuable of Ritson's publications. It received immediate commendation from his contemporaries<sup>44</sup> and has been continually praised since.<sup>45</sup> Not only did it afford "innocent amusement to the gay", but by presenting the valuable songs of a forgotten age it furnished future poets and historians with a storehouse of fable and tradition from which they might draw hints for their own writings.

Ritson continued his researches in the poetry of antiquity and perpetuated his fame as an accurate and conscientious editor by the publication, in 1791, of *Pieces of Ancient Popular Poetry; from authentic manuscripts, and old printed copies*. This volume, like its forerunners, exhibits a high grade of typography. The fifteen woodcuts by Thomas and John Bewick,<sup>46</sup> which illustrate the poems, are among the most pleasing of all those that adorn Ritson's publications. The collection is small, consisting of an ingenious preface, seven poems with brief historical introductions, and a glossary. The only ballad in the group, "The King and the Barker", described as "the undoubted original of "King Edward

<sup>44</sup>See *Monthly Review*, Vol. XCIII, pp. 178-82.

<sup>45</sup>See Haslewood, *Op. Cit.*, p. 15; Nicolas, *Op. Cit.*, p. XLIV; and Lowndes, *Bibliographer's Manual*. An article in *Fraser's Magazine*, Dec., 1833, makes wholesale condemnation of Ritson's works. With regard to *Ancient Songs* there is a curious inconsistency which shows the shifts to which the Reviewer is put to avoid giving any praise to Ritson. In the first place he ridicules the affectation of quaintness which caused Ritson to print his poems with Anglo-Saxon characters, whereas these have been discarded in the second edition, which he is admittedly reviewing. He then turns to the book at his elbow to lament the lack of illustrations to make the pieces "grateful either to the eye or taste", but the first edition was plentifully supplied with charming vignettes. An undivided attention to either edition of the book would destroy one or other of his objections.

<sup>46</sup>To Thomas Bewick (1753-1828) is ascribed the restoration of wood engraving as an art in England. John Bewick (1760-95) is less noted as an engraver than his elder brother.

IV and the Tanner of Tamworth" as printed by Percy, is reproduced from the very defective copy in the Cambridge library. Joseph Frank, editor of the second edition of the collection says of it:

"Mr. Ritson intended, in any future edition, to have suppressed this piece, which was originally printed chiefly with a view to bringing to light some more accurate copy: an effect which has not been, nor is now likely to be, produced."<sup>47</sup>

"Adam Bel" is given from Copland's black letter copy, but there is nothing in the introduction or notes to indicate that it was republished for the "insignificant purpose of immortalizing the true readings" of that editor in preference to Percy's.<sup>48</sup> Surely the editor may be allowed to disagree with two of the Bishop's etymologies without being stigmatized as envious. The antiquity and popularity of the piece were sufficient recommendations for its insertion. "The Life and Death of Tom Thumbe", a delightful account of the marvelous exploits of this doughty hero of childhood; "The Friere and the Boy", evidently of French extraction; "How a Merchande dyd hys wyfe Betray"; the little moral piece, "How the Wise Man taught his son"; and "The Lover's Quarrel", are all given from authentic old copies, mostly in black letter. To these was added "Sir Percy" in the second edition.

The preface to this little volume is quite illuminating. Although popular interest in old poetry was on the increase, yet Ritson still felt it necessary to apologize for these old compositions, "which will have few charms in the critical eye of a cultivated age."

"The genius which has been successfully exerted in contributing to the instruction or amusement of society in even the rudest times", he says, "is a superannuated domestic whose passed services entitled his old age to a comfortable provision and retreat; or rather, indeed, a humble friend, whose attachment in adverse circumstances demands the warm and grateful acknowledgments of prosperity."<sup>49</sup>

It was to the humble beginnings of these "nameless bards" of antiquity that Ritson thought posterity was indebted for a Homer and a Chaucer. And this was ample reason for preserving carefully every genuine relique which could be discovered. The poems in his collection he attributed to the minstrels—men

"who made it their profession to chant or rehearse them up and down the country in the trophied hall or before the gloomy castle, and at marriages, wakes, and other festive meetings, and who, generally accompanied their strains, by no

<sup>47</sup>*Pieces of Ancient Popular Poetry*, 2nd edition, London, 1833, p. 59.

<sup>48</sup>See *Monthly Review*, Vol. XCIII, p. 73.

<sup>49</sup>*Pieces of Anc. Pop. Poetry*, Pref., p. v.

means ruder than the age itself, with the tinkling of a harp, or sometimes, it is apprehended with the graces of a much humbler instrument."<sup>50</sup>

Ritson intended this little volume to be suggestive. He was himself engaged in collecting popular poetry for future publication and expressed the hope that others might be inspired to undertake similar tasks. In addition to publishing many volumes of antiquarian interest, he rendered a distinct service to the study of medieval poetry by constantly reminding his generation of the richness of the unworked mine of antiquity. He lost no opportunity to stimulate research after the scarcely known but excellent old songs which he described as abounding "with a harmony, spirit, keenness, and natural humor, little to be expected, perhaps, in compositions of so remote a period."

*Ancient Popular Poetry* was presented to the world with a degree of candor and fidelity as remarkable as it was little to be experienced in similar publications of the period. What with the forgeries of Chatterton, Macpherson, Evans, and Pinkerton, and the surreptitious additions and clandestine alterations of Percy, it was deserving of no small honor to print from known and designated authorities and to notice in the margin every variation from the original which a "disuse of contractions and a systematization of punctuation" rendered necessary. This was Ritson's method. As an example of its successful application, he submitted *Ancient Popular Poetry* "to the patronage of the liberal and the candid, of those whom the artificial refinements of modern taste have not rendered totally insensible to the humble effusions of unpolished nature, and the simplicity of old times."<sup>51</sup>

At this point Ritson's work with popular poetry was temporarily interrupted by his editing *Dido; A Tragedy: as it was performed at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane, with universal applause, by Joseph Reed,*

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. vii-viii. Ritson's emphasis here on the character of the minstrels was a continuation of the theory advanced in the dissertation on that subject presented in *Ancient Songs* in opposition to Percy's theory. See below, Chapter VII.

<sup>51</sup>*Pieces of Anc. Pop. Poetry*, Pref., p. xiii. Although Ritson would by no means have called them "liberal and candid" beings, the reviewers were very generous in praise of his execution of a meretorious service in publishing these pieces. See *Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. LXI, p. 561 ff., and *Monthly Review*, Vol. XCII, p. 73 ff. The writer in *Fraser's Magazine*, to whom reference has already been made, condemns this, as he does all Ritson's work. There is not the slightest basis in fact for his assertion that "several of the pieces were published originally with the purpose only of gratifying Ritson's malevolence." This volume came to a second edition in 1833, and a third in 1884, but the Reviewer gives it as his "sincere opinion" that "Ritson never wrote or compiled anything worthy of a reprint." His peevish chiding at the public for admiring books which he had told them to despise, makes him a ridiculous figure.

the controversial dramatist, native of Stockton. Reed left Stockton for London in 1757; so Ritson could not have met him in Stockton excepting on a visit. There is no doubt that they saw more or less of each other in London after Ritson had gone there. Furthermore, Reed's son, John, was the intimate friend of John Baynes, one of Ritson's few close acquaintances in the Inn. Ritson respected Reed's talents and is said to have contemplated an eight-volume edition of his "Miscellanies", which he was prevented by death from preparing. The tragedy, which he saw through the press and for which he supplied a preface and some notes, was never published. It was printed in 1792 but not formally announced for publication till 1808. At this time nearly the whole impression was destroyed by fire. The few copies that were saved were purchased by a friend of Reed's and have not been traced since.<sup>52</sup>

In 1792 Ritson's sister was again ill, and she died early the following year. Ritson's connection with the north in each of these years is evidenced by the publication, in the first of them, of *The North-Country Chorister; an unparalleled variety of Excellent Songs*, at Durham; and in the second, of *The Northumberland Garland; or, Newcastle Nightingale: a matchless collection of famous songs*, at Newcastle. *The North-Country Chorister* is the shortest of all the *Garlands*, consisting of six rather brief pieces supposedly the work of a Bishopric ballad-singer. The fifth and last of these little poetical collections, *The Northumberland Garland*, is the longest and in some respects the most interesting of all. Of the sixteen songs which it contains—many of them from small poets of the region, but some genuine border ballads—especial interest attaches to "The Hunting of the Cheviat". Eight years after Ritson's death there appeared in the *Gentleman's Magazine*<sup>53</sup> an "Ode to Mr. Ritson, on his intended descriptive revision of the ancient ballad of 'Chevy Chase', (written near the spot) in 1791." It is accompanied by the following explanatory note:

"The purpose Mr. Ritson once entertained of publishing the above ballad with historical and topographical observations, was revoked soon after a visit he made to the north, one of the objects of which was to collect materials."

It must have been about this time that Ritson had in mind the revision of the poem, but the full design was never carried out, for the song printed in *The Northumberland Garland* has neither introduction nor notes.<sup>54</sup> How much superior to this copy would have been the product

<sup>52</sup>See Nichols, *Lit. Anec.*, IX, p. 116 and note; Nicolas, *Op. Cit.*, p. liii.

<sup>53</sup>Vol. LXXXI, p. 568.

<sup>54</sup>Child unaccountably overlooked this publication of the A version, which antedates by three-quarters of a century the copy in Skeat's *Specimens* (1873) which he gives as its earliest appearance in print. *Op. Cit.*, III, pp. 303-15. (No. 162).

of Ritson's original design may be judged from the high commendation of Ritson given in the "Ode".

4. Wert thou, discerning Ritson, near,  
Thou would'st the awful scene revere;  
A scene made sacred by those rhymes,  
Which thou may'st deck for latest times.
5. Thy fancy, from her store, would yield  
A thousand shades to throng the field:—  
And sounds create of trampling steed,  
Or arrow, wing'd with deathful speed.
6. Much to the Mitred Sage [Percy] is due;  
Ritson, the liberal task pursue—  
And *Chevy Chase*, the pride of you,  
With all its feudal spoils, restore.

These little *Garlands*, without glossary and lacking critical notes, are today of interest primarily to the local antiquary. They made a wider appeal in their own day, however. Put up in the form of the penny histories usually sold by itinerant hawkers, they met with a ready sale and soon became quite scarce. Ritson is reported to have said that these volumes sold better than any other of his various publications,<sup>55</sup> and although he had his customary difficulties with the publishers, he did not lose money on these books.<sup>56</sup> But in spite of their quick and ready sale, they were not immediately reprinted. Ritson made corrections and additions whenever the necessity was brought to his attention, but he was constantly bringing out new books and the frequent misunderstandings with his publishers prevented out-of-print books from going automatically to a reprint or a new edition.

In 1793 Ritson printed the first, and the next year the second and third, volumes of *The English Anthology*, a compilation which he had put together before 1785. With the fact of its early composition in mind, Ritson's statement in the Advertisement that it is prepared upon "a plan hitherto unattempted" can be understood. Before its appearance in print, however, *The Muse's Library* and Ellis's *Specimens* had been published. Ritson ought, then, to have modified his claims as a pioneer. He professes to have followed a foreign model—the French anthology<sup>57</sup>—but he could have got nothing there but the bare plan, for that work is

<sup>55</sup>Park in *English Songs*, I, p. xcvi.

<sup>56</sup>For trouble over *The Northumberland Garland* see *Letters*, II, p. 129 ff; and for *North-Country Chorister*, *Ibid.*, II, 221 ff.

<sup>57</sup>*Anthologie française ou Chansons choisies, depuis le xiii<sup>e</sup> siècle jusqu'à présent*, 3 vols., 1765.



a compilation of songs and music. But wherever the plan was derived, it is not a highly advantageous one in its present adaptation. Although professedly chronological, the poems are arranged in four Parts and a supplement. Part 1 gives a chronological arrangement from Wyatt to Cotton; Part 2 is devoted to poems by women; Part 3, to extracts from long pieces; and the Supplement to living authors. While the arrangement within the Parts is fairly chronological, yet the division into Parts leads to such confusion that without the "Index of Authors" one would be at a loss to find any given selection. Evidences of the absurdity of the plan are the beginning of the first volume with Wyatt, the second with Dyer, the third with Chaucer, and the placing of Mason's "Isis" at volume III, page 262, and Warton's "Triumph of Isis", which is an answer to it, at volume II, page 136. Even within the different Parts the chronology is based on the date of the poet's birth.<sup>58</sup> But it is the date of an author's poem, and not of his birth or death, that should be the determining factor in placing it in a collection of poetry.

In the Advertisement Ritson indulges in rather high praise of his own work. He is justified in commending it as an elegant and accurate compilation. The engravings by Stothard are pleasing, and the fidelity to the best sources in printing is characteristic of Ritson's editorship. There is here a further touch of the apologetic tone which has been noticed in the prefaces to all his collections and which was characteristic of his age. Poetry prior to the sixteenth century was denied a place in his volumes—"the nicety of the present age being ill disposed to make the necessary allowances for the uncouth diction and homely sentiments of former times." Ritson was again making an avowed appeal for popular favor, but this Advertisement is marred by a revival of his ill-natured abuse of the reviewers. His editorial labors in the various collections so far considered had been generally commended, but of the historical essays which accompanied some of them there had been much adverse criticism. Ritson failed to distinguish between the commendation of his editorial abilities and the condemnation of his controversial asperity; or, if he made the distinction, he considered the praise as mere sop. Just now he was smarting under the rather contemptuous dismissal of his third Shakespeare pamphlet, and there is no doubt that the increasing severity of his illness made him more sensitive to criticism and less capable of controlling his wrath. These circumstances combined to produce the following splenetic attack upon his critics.

<sup>58</sup>Ritson omitted from the first volume several poets whose dates he did not know. When this information was supplied after an appeal to the public in the Advertisement, all these men were included in the later volumes—a sufficient test of his "chronological" plan.

"Nor will any person be found to rescue such things [poems before 1500] from oblivion, while the attempt exposes him to the malignant and ruffian-like attacks of some hackney scribbler or personal enemy, through the medium of one or other of two periodical publications, in which the most illiberal abuse is vented under colour of impartial criticism, and both the literary and moral character of every man who wishes to make his peculiar studies contribute to the information or amusement of society are at the mercy of a conceited pedant, or dark and cowardly assassin. The editor, at the same time, by no means, flatters himself, that either the omission of what is obscure and unintelligible, or the insertion of every thing elegant and refined, will be sufficient to protect these volumes from the rancorous malice and envenomed slander of the reviewing critic. He appeals, however, from the partial censures of a mercenary and malevolent individual, to the judgment and candour of a generous and discerning public, whose approbation is proposed as the sole reward of his disinterested labours."<sup>59</sup>

This venomous tirade may have been suggested partially by a feeling, which all his proud claims for the work were not able wholly to repress, that it would not be highly successful. The "discerning public" did not call for the second edition which he began preparing,<sup>60</sup> and the reviewers considered it as only one more book.<sup>61</sup> While it contains a wealth of poetry, the pieces are not skillfully arranged and the work as a whole duplicates individual authors in many cases and collections in others.

By this time Ritson's nervous derangement had become so serious as to interfere vitally with his literary labors. He continued to publish material which he had been working on for years and had nearly ready for the press, but new projects were not undertaken with his customary alacrity. Some time in 1792 he had borrowed from Harrison his manuscript of the *Memoirs of Captain John Hodgson* (d. 1684) with the intention of transcribing it for publication. On December 26 of that year he wrote to Harrison:

"I must with shame confess that I have not yet begun the transcript of 'Captain Hodgson's Memoirs', and that it is owing much more to want of inclination than to want of leisure."<sup>62</sup>

On July 21, 1794, he returned the manuscript,

"which I have carefully transcribed, but dare not yet venture to put to press, being already in advance, one way or another, above five hundred pounds; a good part of which, I begin to fear, will never find its way back."<sup>63</sup>

Just how much editing Ritson had done or intended to do on this work

<sup>59</sup>*Eng. Anthology*, Advertisement, pp. v-vi.

<sup>60</sup>See *Letters*, II, p. 26.

<sup>61</sup>See *British Critic*, Vol. I, pp. 95-7; *Critical Review*, Vol. X, pp. 196-9; Vol. XII, pp. 412-13; *Monthly Review*, Vol. XCVI, p. 125; Vol. XCVIII, pp. 229-30.

<sup>62</sup>*Letters*, II, p. 26.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, II, p. 54.

is not known. Nothing has been said about his concern with it. When Scott published the *Memoirs* with those of Sir Henry Slingsby, in 1806,<sup>64</sup> he included Ritson's Advertisement, but there is no indication that he made use of Ritson's transcript. In the Advertisement Ritson declared it to be his opinion that in point of importance, interest, and even pleasantry, Hodgson's narrative was infinitely superior to Defoe's *Memoirs of a Cavalier*, although other critics have been less enthusiastic in their praise.<sup>65</sup>

In the Preface to *English Songs* Ritson justified the "careful omission" of Scottish songs from that collection by the promise of the publication of "a much better and more perfect collection of songs entirely Scottish, than any that has been hitherto attempted."<sup>66</sup> Neither is the part played by the Scottish muse in the development of national song mentioned in the historical dissertation, for "an accurate investigation and ample discussion of this curious and important subject is intended for a future opportunity."<sup>67</sup> The collection begun thus early received the intermittent attention of years and was the slow product of long labor.

It is impossible to say when Ritson's interest in Scottish history and poetry began. Reared, as he was, in the extreme north of England, the influence of Scottish tradition must have been felt very early. On his first visit to Edinburgh, at the age of twenty, he purchased a volume of Scottish poems and several histories and from that time on seemed almost equally interested in Scottish and English antiquities. From London his annual vacation tours to Stockton often carried him over into Scotland. Especially from 1786 to 1790 was he concerned with the history of the northern kingdom. Besides the information gathered on his own expeditions into the north, he acquired valuable material from friends more advantageously situated than himself. These men he kept constantly informed of his discoveries and of the general progress of his book. As early as 1788 it was commonly known that he was engaged upon this collection, and it seems that he even entertained some hope of publishing it in the winter of that year.<sup>68</sup> The actual printing of the work, however, was not begun till June, 1790,<sup>69</sup> and then it dragged

<sup>64</sup>*Original Memoirs written during the great Civil War; being the life of Sir H. Slingsby, and memoirs of Capt. Hodgson. With notes &c., by Sir Walter Scott. Edinburgh, 1806.*

<sup>65</sup>See Nichols, *Lit. Anec.*, IX, p. 686; Lockhart's *Life of Scott*, Vol. III, p. 2; Carlyle's *Oliver Cromwell*, Vol. I, p. 333.

<sup>66</sup>*Eng. Songs*, Pref., p. viii.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, *Hist. Essay*, p. xciii.

<sup>68</sup>Walker to Percy, *Lit. Anec.*, VII, p. 709.

<sup>69</sup>*Letters*, I, pp. 164-68.

on so slowly that Ritson could "form no possible idea of its being completed", and exclaimed that his bookseller was born to plague him.<sup>70</sup> During the next four years, while a part of the material was at the printer's, he continued his sometimes futile efforts to gather more songs and to verify the words and music of those already in his possession. In this endeavor he was materially aided by his old friends Walker, Harrison, and Shield, who corrected much of the music, and by Herd<sup>71</sup> and Alexander Campbell,<sup>72</sup> whose acquaintance he made because of a common interest in Scottish poetry. His stock of material increased so rapidly that in 1793 he was able to say (without exaggeration, as the catalogue of his library proves), that he possessed "almost every volume of Scottish poetry, ancient and modern, hitherto printed", and was "nearly as perfect in Scottish history".<sup>73</sup> After a satisfactory adjustment of difficulties with his engravers, Ritson hoped for the publication of his collection by Christmas, 1793, and began to take steps for its advance sale. The following letter is typical of his interests at this time.

MS. Laing II. 124.

No. 104	Case <sup>74</sup>
x435	Dissertatio <sup>75</sup>
603	Tristan <sup>76</sup>
808	} Hailes <sup>77</sup>
809	

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 187.

<sup>71</sup>Laing introduced Ritson and Herd, and they exchanged ideas about Scottish poetry. *Ibid.*, II, p. 142.

<sup>72</sup>Campbell (1764-1824) corrected Ritson's version of *Lesly's March*. *Ibid.*, I, p. 219.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, II, p. 2.

<sup>74</sup>The titles and numbers which stand at the head of this letter have evidently been taken from the bookseller's catalogue, and it is impossible to trace them down with absolute certainty. Only one of the entire list appears in the catalogue of the sale of Ritson's library; so it would seem that his fear that most of them were already disposed of when he wrote had been well founded. "Case" probably refers to John Case's *Angelical Guide, shewing men and women their lott or chance in this elementary life in IV books*, 1697, in which Ritson would have been interested because of his sceptical philosophy.

<sup>75</sup>British Museum catalogue lists 33 titles beginning with *Dissertatio* and antedating this letter. The most of them deal with affairs of the Church, and it is impossible to determine to which one, if to any, Ritson alludes.

<sup>76</sup>Probably one of the versions of the Tristan saga: by Gast, Paris, 1520, 1533; by Mangin, Lyon, 1577, Paris, 1586; or by Thessen, Paris, 1781, 1787.

<sup>77</sup>Ritson left annotated copies of Sir David Dalrymple, Lord Hailes's *Annals of Scotland from Malcolm III to Robert I*, and *from Robert I to the House of Stuart*, 1776. See also *Letters*, II, p. 47.

903 A proper project<sup>78</sup>  
 x2413 Noble<sup>79</sup>  
 x2619 Colville<sup>80</sup>  
 5655 Sibbald<sup>81</sup>

Gray's Inn, 20th Novr. 1793.

My good friend,

I have purposed writing to you for some time, but as you would have got nothing by it, you will think it just as well perhaps that i have deferred my letter till it became productive of some little advantage. I am vexed, at the same time, that i could not write yesterday, as most likely such of the above numbers as i wish most to see are already disposed of. I dare not mention Sibbald, as in the first place i suspect it *not* to be complete, and secondly, i am terrified at the idea of your unexpressed & inconceivable charge. You may put up the few articles you send me (if not too late) in Egerton's<sup>82</sup> parcel; & i will pay the charge into your account with them. I will also pay them if agreeable to you, the sum of ten guineas which you will be so good as to pay over to Mr. Allan to whom i write by this post. My book is nearly ready for publication, & will certainly appear by or about Christmas. I have not taken the liberty to put your name to it, for which, I take it, on a perusal of the introduction, you will think yourself not a little obliged to me.<sup>83</sup> I cannot easily reconcile your assurance of the sale of a number of copies with your indetermination to take one. The expense of sending a parcel to Edinburgh

<sup>78</sup>This may allude to one of the numerous "Projects" of the time.

<sup>79</sup>Probably either the *Genealogical History of the Royal Families of Europe*, 1781, or *Memoirs of the Protectoral House of Cromwell*, 1784 and 1787, or both, by Mark Noble (1754-1827). Ritson was interested in royal genealogies and had himself published privately a *Table of the Descent of the English Crown*, 1778. Furthermore, both editions of Noble's second work had been severely criticized by Ritson's friend, Richard Gough, in the preface to his *Short Genealogical View of the Family of Oliver Cromwell*, 1785, and in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, June, 1787, p. 516. See *Lit. Anec.*, VIII, p. 133, note.

<sup>80</sup>The *Poetical Works* of Robert Colvill, minor Scottish poet, appeared in 1789.

<sup>81</sup>Sir Robert Sibbald (1641-1712), chiefly noted for his *History of Fife*, 1710, wrote a great number of treatises on antiquarian subjects for the Royal Society. These were published in 1739 as *A Collection of Several Treatises in folio, concerning Scotland, as it was of old, and also in later times*. On July 30, 1793, Ritson wrote to Laing for a copy of Sibbald's *Works*, which was to be purchased from the library of James Cumyng. See *Letters*, II, p. 19.

<sup>82</sup>T. and J. Egerton, London booksellers, published Ritson's *English Anthology*, and *Scotish Songs*.

<sup>83</sup>In the "Historical Essay" the Scottish literati are condemned as the world's most notorious forgers. Ritson somehow acquired, or was possessed of an inherent dislike of the Scotch. He always questioned their integrity and on one occasion remarked, "The character given of Scottish men by old surly Johnson was, generally speaking, far from unjust. They prefer anything to truth, when the latter is at all injurious to the national honour: nor are they, so far as I can perceive, very solicitous about it on any occasion." *Letters*, I, p. 191.

may be no great object, but to have it returned entire is what i should not like: so if you will answer for 50 i will send you 100, if 25, 50, if 10, 20, if 5, 10, if none, not one, *sat verbum*.<sup>84</sup>

I am much obliged to Mr. Brown,<sup>85</sup> & request whenever you meet him you will exert your eloquence in remembering my friendship & respect. I am much chagrined at the fate of my King Charles spurs, which were really curious,<sup>86</sup> as well as at the loss of Mr. Paton's parcel. Please to present my best compliments to that worthy man & say that i mean to have the pleasure of writing to him in a little time. I must give up, i find, all expectation of becoming acquainted with the old volume which has given all of us so much trouble. I sometimes think of addressing myself directly to the dean, but "the insolence of office" would most probably prevent him from paying any attention to my request.<sup>87</sup>

Pray why have i never heard anything further of the Edinburgh catalogue?<sup>88</sup> It would be of great use to me in a work i am now amused with; & which i mean to be a kind of a sort of a Scottish library of historians & poets.<sup>89</sup> In this, which i think i must come down to finish & print in Edinburgh, you would be of no little service. Who or what is Robert Colville? Can you get me the two (or more) poems he has published?

Mr. Wm. Laing,  
Bookseller,  
Chessel's Buildings  
Canongate  
Edinburgh.

I am,  
Your sincere friend &  
well-wisher,  
J. Ritson.

<sup>84</sup>Despite this ultimatum, in March, 1794, Ritson sent Laing 50 copies of the work, with the following directions as to their disposal: "Twelve you take yourself; five you will present, with the Editor's compliments, to Mr. Fraser Tytler, Mr. Allan, Mr. Brown, Mr. Paton, and Mr. Campbell—that is one to each; the rest you will sell on my account, if you can. The expense of advertising once or twice in the Edinburgh papers I must of course be debited with. You will scarcely believe that the publication of these two small and unfortunately unequal volumes stands me in three hundred pounds. I make up my mind of course, to a considerable loss." *Letters*, II, p. 47.

<sup>85</sup>Alexander Brown, librarian of the Advocates' Library. See *Letters*, II, p. 21.

<sup>86</sup>Ritson had sent to James Cumyng, Secretary of the Society of Antiquaries of Edinburgh, his rare King Charles's spurs, as a gift to the Society. Upon Cumyng's death, early in 1793, his entire library was purchased by Laing. After repeated inquiry Ritson learned that the spurs had been lost in transferring the property. See *Letters*, II, p. 21 ff.

<sup>87</sup>This refers to an "old volume of Tracts" which Tytler had drawn from the Advocates' Library, and from which Ritson wished especially a transcript of the "six first lines of Robin Hood". See *Letters*, II, pp. 4, 21; *Archibald Constable and his Literary Correspondents*, London, 1873, Vol. I, pp. 505, 509.

<sup>88</sup>Ritson suggested to Laing, who was noted for his catalogues, that he make a complete compilation of books published in Scotland, and offered his own ideas as to the best method of procedure. See *Letters*, II, pp. 38, 48.

But it was not until March, 1794, that the long-delayed edition of *Scottish Songs* appeared in two volumes. It is easily perceived to be complementary to *English Songs*. There is a prefatory "Historical Essay on Scottish Song" in which Ritson indulges in further unseemly slurs on Percy and begins a systematic attack upon what he dubs Pinkerton's "Scottish system". The songs are arranged in four classes: I. Love; II. Comic; III. Historical, Political, and Martial; IV. Romantic and Legendary, or Ballads. As Ritson declared it his belief, with Tytler, that "the words and melody of a Scottish song should be ever inseparable";<sup>90</sup> he has accompanied the verses in this collection with the musical notation wherever the combined ingenuity and labor of himself and Shield were able to discover or to reconstruct it. When the music was irreparably lost, the bars are printed so that the notes can be inserted with a pen if they are recovered. The critical comments evince a wide and intimate acquaintance with Scottish history and reveal interesting anecdotes concerning the subjects of the songs. The collection itself is rather disappointing. Nearly all the songs had previously appeared in print, and many of them were so easily accessible as to cause surprise at their republication.<sup>91</sup> There appears here some ground for the criticism frequently levelled against Ritson that he reprinted many pieces solely in order to expose the errors of previous editors. In *Scottish Songs* he had much to say about the errors, both wilful and unconscious, of his predecessors. He was frequently vituperative and seldom charitable. The most thoroughly depreciative article appeared in the *Critical Review* for January, 1795. Ritson is there declared to be "immodest", "inaccurate", and "unscholarly". He is ridiculed for attempting to give serious consideration to such inconsequential things as ballads and is accused of sparing no pains "to reject any improvement, and to restore them to error and imperfection." "To us who are accustomed to treat trifles as trifles", exclaims the Reviewer, "what must appear to be the power of that mind which can descant with such dignity on the ballad!" Here is the poetic judgment of Pre-Reliquan days opposing itself to the new light of Romanticism. The knowledge that Pinkerton himself was the author

<sup>89</sup>"Bibliographia Scotica", See Chapter VI.

<sup>90</sup>*Scottish Songs*, Pref., p. i. See William Tytler's *Dissertation on the Scottish Music*.

<sup>91</sup>Forty-six of the songs are taken from *Ancient and Modern Scottish Songs, heroic ballads, etc.*, forty-two from Ramsay's *Teatable Miscellany*; fourteen from Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum*; six from Percy's *Reliques*; and the remainder from ancient manuscripts and editions of the various author's poems.

of this Review,<sup>92</sup> gives it less the character of a reflection of the critical spirit of the age and more that of a defence of personal conduct. Both Percy and Pinkerton felt the lash of Ritson's denunciation for deceiving the public by presenting modern compositions in the guise of antiquity and for augmenting ancient sources with verses of their own without complimenting the reader's intelligence by distinguishing between the old and the new. This spirit of carping criticism and fault-finding was denounced by the reviewers as it had been in the earlier volumes on Shakespeare. But Pinkerton's attitude was not wholly representative of the times.<sup>93</sup> Ballads were not universally considered as inconsequential things. If the spirit of the age had been so opposed to pieces of ancient popular poetry and so prejudiced in favor of the polished poems of modern composers as the apologetic tone of the prefaces to the numerous editions of old poems would lead one to suspect, those very editions would not have been so numerous. That they continued to be produced and to be received with favor is the best proof of the real feeling of the time toward them.

Ritson now turned his attention from general collections of poetry to the remains of an unknown poet of antiquity. In 1795 he issued "*Poems on interesting events in the reign of King Edward III. written Anno MCCCLII, by Laurence Minot, with a preface, dissertations, notes, and glossary.*" Prior to this time Minot was all but unknown. He is not mentioned by Leland, Bale, Pits, or Tanner. The first reference to him is in a note to the "Essay on the learning and versification of Chaucer", in which Tyrwhitt alludes to the discovery of the poems of one Laurence Minot in MS. Galba E. ix. of the Cottonian collection.<sup>94</sup> After Minot's name was brought to light in that brief notice a copy of the poems was transmitted to Warton for his *History of English Poetry*, in the third volume of which they are printed with neither scrupulous care nor unflinching accuracy.<sup>95</sup> It remained for Ritson to edit the manuscript with a degree of faithfulness and care worthy the student of Middle English poetry.

Although he was pioneering in his edition of Minot, Ritson went at his task in a thoroughly scholarly fashion. His text follows the manu-

<sup>92</sup>Ritson suspected the authorship from the first. See *Letters*, II, p. 67. This article is reprinted in *Letters from Joseph Ritson to George Paton*, Edinburgh, 1820, as "A critique by John Pinkerton upon Ritson's Scottish Songs."

<sup>93</sup>See the favorable review in *British Critic*, Vol. V, pp. 490-502.

<sup>94</sup>Thomas Tyrwhitt, *The Canterbury Tales of Chaucer*, Oxford, 1775.

<sup>95</sup>Although some of the errors in Warton's edition were undoubtedly due to his copyist, Ritson saw fit to sneer at the historian's indolence and ignorance. See *Minot's Poems*, Pref., p. viii.



script closely and accurately except that for some unexplained reason he omits the fourth of the eleven poems—the only one of the group which lacks a descriptive couplet heading. The second edition is practically a reprint,<sup>96</sup> and modern editors have found few errors of transcription. Ritson's notes are mostly historical in character and are chiefly taken from Berner's translation of Froissart and from the *Chronicles* of Fabin, Holinshed, and Stow. They are not mere citations or clippings from authority but are illustrated with his own vast and intimate knowledge, which serves often to correct and to supplement the ancient writers. Upon two points of importance he enlarged so freely that the material became too bulky for notes and was transferred to the beginning of the book as introductory dissertations, "On the Scottish Wars of King Edward III.," and "On the title of King Edward III. to the Crown of France." The glossary is necessarily incomplete, as many words were here encountered for the first time and required further investigation. Of his inability to make the glossary exhaustive Ritson remarked: "It seems no part of an editor's duty to save his reader the trouble of guessing at the meaning of expressions for which they cannot possibly be more at a loss than he is himself."<sup>97</sup>

On points of interest in connection with the manuscript and with the personality of Minot himself Ritson passed judgment so far as the meagreness of available material would permit. Warton dated the unique manuscript in the reign of Henry VI., Ritson in that of Richard II., but it is probably not older than the early years of the fifteenth century.<sup>98</sup> From obvious internal evidence Ritson placed the conclusion of the poems in 1352 and judged that, because the stirring events following that date are not celebrated, the poet did not live to see them. The later conjecture that Minot continued to write after 1352 but that his poems have been lost is less probable. There is no development of style in the poems now extant, which would seem to indicate that Minot was mature when he wrote them, and there is no reason for premising lost poems save perhaps the general tendency to believe that the medieval poetry which has been preserved represents only a small fraction of what was actually written.

<sup>96</sup>*Poems, written anno MCCCLII by Laurence Minot. With introductory dissertations on the Scottish Wars of Edward III and on his claim to the throne of France, and notes and glossary.* London, 1825. References are to this edition.

<sup>97</sup>*Minot's Poems*, Pref., p. xviii.

<sup>98</sup>See Thomas Wright, *Political Poems*, London, 1859, Vol. I, p. 58; Joseph Hall, *The Poems of Laurence Minot*, Oxford, 1887, p. v; Morris and Skeat, *Specimens of Early English*, Oxford, 1873, Vol. II, p. 126; Prof. Herford's life of Minot in *Dict. Nat. Biog.*

Of Minot himself nothing is known but what may be gleaned from the poems he has left. From the prevalence of Northern dialect forms Ritson concluded the author was a native of one of the northern counties. There seems, however, to be a sufficient mingling of Midland forms to indicate that the poet was familiar with both dialects, although he was unquestionably a Northerner.

Theories as to the author's profession and position in life are equally conjectural. Without pretending to sufficient knowledge of the matter to pass final judgment, Ritson surmised that Minot may have belonged to one of the monasteries in the north. This opinion, evidently based on the religious allusions in the poems, is seconded in essence by Bierbaum,<sup>99</sup> who called Minot a priest. The lack of a general knowledge of Middle English poetry, with the perspective which it would have afforded, prevented Ritson from knowing that the religious references in Minot were no more numerous than was common in poetry of that period. So that it seems more probable that Minot was a soldierly minstrel who wrote and sang for the army but was also favored by the court.<sup>100</sup> Ritson, indeed, came near this view in an indirect way when he pointed out that many of the poems are written in the manner of an eye-witness who celebrates events still fresh in mind.

Minot's literary excellence lies mainly in his versification. His most frequent measure is the popular six line strophe, but he employs other forms in both rhymed and alliterative verse. He was no mean metricist, but he scarcely merits the exuberant praise bestowed upon him by Ritson:

"In point of ease, harmony, and variety of versification, as well as general perspicuity, Laurence Minot is, perhaps, equal, if not superior, to any English poet before the sixteenth, or even, with very few exceptions before the seventeenth century."<sup>101</sup>

In facility of rhyming and choice of words Ritson gave precedence only to Robert of Brunne and Thomas Tusser; Chaucer he excepted from all such comparisons. The enthusiasm of the discoverer is reflected in this high praise, and the handicap under which the explorer works is seen in the errors which Ritson committed in the work. But with it all his edition of Minot deserves the commendation which it received

<sup>99</sup>Bierbaum, *Ueber Laurence Minot und seine Lieder*, 1876.

<sup>100</sup>Cf. Herford, *Op. Cit.*, and B. ten Brink, *Geschichte der Englischen Literatur*. Strassburg, 1899, Vol. I, p. 375.

<sup>101</sup>*Minot's Poems*, Pref., p. xiv.

at the hands of his contemporaries<sup>102</sup> and from the pens of later scholars.<sup>103</sup>

It was naturally to be expected that a poetical antiquary who concerned himself particularly with songs and ballads should eventually take up the subject of Robin Hood. One should expect to find Robin Hood ballads in every volume of "Ancient Popular Poetry", but one looks in vain for any material concerning the border outlaw in Ritson's collection of that title. Realizing the inconsistency of the omission, he justified the procedure in the announcement that he was reserving "the poems, ballads, and historical or miscellaneous matter relating to this celebrated outlaw", for separate treatment. This promised publication made its appearance in two volumes, 1795, as *Robin Hood: a collection of all the ancient poems, songs, and ballads, now extant, relative to that celebrated English Outlaw. To which are prefixed Historical Anecdotes of his Life*. It is a monument of industry, the result of years of investigation and study, and brings to a fitting close the first period of Ritson's editorial activity.

The Life of Robin Hood, with which the first volume opens, does not profess to be historically authentic. Although Ritson considered Robin Hood as an historical character, he was unable to ground his biography on unassailable authorities. He had recourse to the Robin Hood legends, anecdotes, and allusions in the manuscripts and printed works of numerous ancient and modern writers, and from these he constructed a history "which, though it may fail to satisfy, may possibly serve to amuse." The Life is short, covering only twelve pages; but there are a hundred and fifteen pages of "Notes and Illustrations." In this section of the work are to be found valuable contributions to the store of Robin Hood information. Ritson took most of the "facts" of the Life from the prose manuscript in the Sloane library in which Robin Hood is given definite dates, but he supplemented this by frequent quotations from other early writers. In addition he has constructed a chronology from 1593 to 1784 of the dramatic exhibitions in which Robin Hood's exploits are recounted, has listed the Robin Hood ballads and songs and the collections of them from the fourteenth century to the *Reliques*, and has given a number of Robin Hood proverbs. The bringing into one view of this vast store of material was a meritorious service; and in spite of the outcropping of Ritson's scurrility in disrespectful allusions to Christianity and in spiteful reference to other editors, it is not to be ignored by the student of Robin Hood.

<sup>102</sup>Cf. *Monthly Review*, Vol. CII, p. 464; *British Critic*, Vol. IX, p. 22; *Dibden's Director*, Vol. I, p. 88.

<sup>103</sup>See any of the writers cited above.

As for the remainder of the work, the first volume contains five songs and the second twenty-eight, each with a brief introduction on the source of the text and the copies with which it was collated. Although twenty-six of the ballads had appeared in Evans's *Old Ballads*<sup>104</sup> in the order given here, Ritson prints them from older sources, usually black letter copies in the collection of Anthony á Wood. To Ritson's collection Child was able to add only five ballads. Of these "The Bold Pedlar and Robin Hood" was known by Ritson to exist, although there is no proof that he knew it before his collection went to press. It is probable that this information was furnished by Scott, who seems to have promised to get a copy of the ballad for him.<sup>105</sup> In the introduction to the first edition Ritson printed a fragment of "Robin Hood and the Monk" and expressed his regret that the whole was no longer extant. The ballad was given in full in the Appendix to the second edition, 1832, the editor of which says its existence was unknown to Ritson. The three remaining pieces, "Robin Hood and the Pedlars", "Robin Hood and the Scotchman", "Robin Hood, Will Scarlet, and Little John", were not known to Ritson.

Ritson was accused of allowing his antiquarian zeal to overrun his critical acumen because he included in his collection pieces which had little but their antiquity to recommend them.<sup>106</sup> Scott, as late as 1830, took him to task for encumbering his pages with such ballads as "Robin Hood and the Tinker", "Robin Hood and the Butcher", "Robin Hood and the Tanner", which were, at best, scarcely more than variations on a single theme; and he said that this collection illustrated at once the excellencies and the defects of Ritson's editorial system—the excellencies in care, accuracy, wide research, etc.; the defects in including whatever was old.<sup>107</sup> It is true that by paying attention rather to the age of his selections than to their poetic merit Ritson missed the appeal to popular favor which had been a large element in the success of the *Reliques* and was later to play a considerable part in the popularity of the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. But while he may be open to the censure of those who seek only pleasant reading, Ritson performed a noteworthy service for scholarship by gathering together all the scattered allusions to Robin Hood and collecting into one compass the various poems relating to the outlaw.<sup>108</sup> The standards of scholarly editorship

<sup>104</sup>Thomas Evans, *Old Ballads, historical and narrative, with some of modern date*. 2 vols. London, 1777.

<sup>105</sup>*Letters*, II, pp. 220, 241.

<sup>106</sup>See *British Critic*, Vol. IX, pp. 16-22; *Fraser's Magazine*, Vol. VIII, p. 717.

<sup>107</sup>*Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, ed. Henderson, Edinburgh and London, 1902. Vol. I, p. 46.

<sup>108</sup>Later editors have been rather chary in their acknowledgment of indebted-

which he set up for himself were then pointed to as blemishes on an otherwise excellent production, but half a century later they received due praise when exemplified by the labors of Child in the ballad field.

ness to Ritson. J. M. Gutch declares that the Historical Essay in his *Lytell Geste of Robin Hode*, 2 vols., London, 1847, is "not grounded on the documents used by Ritson." Yet, despite this asseveration, he reprints almost the whole of Ritson without additions.

## CHAPTER VI.

### EDITORIAL LABORS AFTER 1795

Increasing illness halts publication—Enhances eccentricities—*Essay on Abstinence from Animal Food*—Letter to Chalmers—MS. "Gleanings of Grammar" and "Dictionary"—Supplies material for Brewster's *History of Stockton*—Forms new friendships—Sir Walter Scott seeks his aid—Their correspondence—MS. "Scottish Ballads"—Letter on "Sir Tristrem"—Begins again to publish—*Bibliographia Poetica*—Assisted by Douce and Park—Comments on Lydgate and "Piers Plowman"—MS. "Bibliographia Scotica"—*Metrical Romances*—Contents—Reception—*Caledonian Muse*—Partly printed in 1785—Its subsequent history—Triphook's letter—MS. "Select Scottish Poems"—*Life of King Arthur*—Purpose—*Memoirs of the Celts—Annals of the Caledonians*—Preparation and object—Nature—*Fairy Tales*—Blemishes—Contents—Summary of editorial labors.

The abrupt cessation of Ritson's publications in 1795 was undoubtedly the result of the increasing malignancy of the illness of which he had first complained in 1790. By this time he had become so deranged nervously that writing was attended with great difficulty. He neglected his correspondence and pleaded his illness as an excuse which ought to make him the object of the commiseration of his friends rather than of their resentment. The exact nature of his ailment is difficult to determine. It was not, he said, a fever or a consumption. To all outward appearances he was as healthy as ever. But he complained of increasing forgetfulness in small matters and feared the complete loss of his memory. Friends suggested various remedies, none of which he saw fit to try. His physician advised him that his only hope for anything like permanent relief lay in a complete rest in unfamiliar surroundings. But he could not persuade himself to spare the time and undergo the expense incident to a long sojourn in the country and was content with the brief outings afforded by his annual vacations. The temporary diminution of his distress which these vacations induced was sufficient to enable him to prolong his mental activity, but he realized that he was losing ground rapidly and in 1801 expressed surprise that he had already lived so long.<sup>1</sup>

The neurological character of Ritson's illness increased his sensitiveness, gave him an exaggerated conception of his own importance, and caused him to guard jealously the eccentricities which set him off from the generality of mankind.<sup>2</sup> The revolutionary ardor in politics which was greatly stimulated by his visit to France in 1791 continued with

<sup>1</sup>*Letters*, II, p. 205.

<sup>2</sup>These characteristics are more fully discussed in Chapter VIII.

unabated fervor. He persisted in his vegetarian diet and became so enthusiastic in his endeavors to secure converts to his theory that he issued *An Essay on Abstinence from Animal Food as a Moral Duty*, 1802, as conclusive evidence of the invulnerability of his position. The eccentric theory of orthography which he had first practised in the *Versees* and early propounded in the Shakespeare pamphlets, attracted his attention in these later years. Now he began in earnest the attempt which he had earlier suggested, to reform the whole system of English orthography. This ambitious undertaking brought no fruit in the form of published material, but he seems to have been prevented from putting it to press only by the state of his health and his pocket. His work took shape in three manuscripts, all of which have apparently been destroyed. Something of the nature of his method may be gained from the following letter to Chalmers, in which he seeks to borrow a number of sixteenth century grammars and orthographies. However eccentric his theories may have appeared in his own day, he sought to ground them on authority, and in true antiquarian style he went to the remote past for that authority.

Montagu d. 15, fol. 216, 218.

1. Derickes Image of Ireland, 1581.<sup>3</sup>
2. Bellots English Schoolmaster, 1579.<sup>4</sup>
3. Bullokars Orthographie, 1580.<sup>5</sup>
4. Mulcasters Elementarie, 1582.<sup>6</sup>
5. Grammatica Anglicana, 1594.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup>John Derrick's *Image of Ireland*, in two parts, written in 1578, published 1581, was reprinted with notes by Sir Walter Scott in *Somers Tracts*, 1809, and a limited edition was put out by John Small in 1883. The full title of this book, containing 153 words, is given in Ritson's *Bibliographia Poetica*, pp. 186-7. See also *Letters*, II, p. 148.

<sup>4</sup>The only copy known to exist of Jacques Bellot's *The Englishe Scholemaister: Conteyning many profitable precepts for the naturall borne French men, and other straungers that have their French tongue, to attayne the true pronouncing of the Englishe tongue*, London, 1580, is that preserved at the Hofbibliothek in Darmstadt. It was edited, with a reproduction of the original title page, by Theo. Spira as Vol. VII of *Neudrucke frühneuenglischen Grammatiken*, Halle, 1912.

<sup>5</sup>William Bullokar published in 1580 *Booke at Large for the Amendment of Orthographie for English Speech*. This was followed by two other books dealing with similar subjects. All three were published by Max Plessow in *Geschichte der Fabeldictung in England bis zu John Gay*, Berlin, 1906.

<sup>6</sup>Richard Mulcaster, *First Part of the Elementairie, which entreateth chefelie of the right Writing of our English Tung*, 1582. No second part is known to have appeared; the first has never been reprinted.

<sup>7</sup>*Grammatica Anglicana, praecipue quatenus à Latina differt, ad unicam P. Rami methodum concinnata, etc.*, 1594. Hrsg. von M. Rösler und R. Brotanek. Announced in 1905 for publication in *Neudrucke frühneuenglischen Grammatiken*, but it has not yet appeared.

6. Spensers Three Letters, 1594.<sup>8</sup>

7. Blages Wise conceytes, 1569.<sup>9</sup>

Dear Sir,

If the books mentioned in the inclosed paper be in your own library, as I presume they are, I shall be highly gratified by the perusal of such of them as you can conveniently spare. They shal be treated with care, & returned with expedition.

Yours respectfully

J Ritson

Monday, 6th Feb.

1797.

George Chalmers, Esq.

The result of his labors through a great many years with these and numerous like volumes was the three manuscripts already mentioned. The "Dissertation on the use of Self" was the formulization of his ideas regarding the use of "self" as a substantive, which resulted in his own frequent use of "hissel", "hersel", etc. "Gleanings of English Grammar, chiefly with a view to illustrate and establish a just system of orthography, upon etymological principles" probably took the nature of a dissertation explanatory of the more elaborate project which he described as an "orthographico-etymological dictionary of the English language." Besides the formal defense of his own theories of orthography there are several references in his letters to the inadequacy of existing lexicographies. Johnson's dictionary he declared to contain the "strangest mixture of ignorance and idleness that was ever exhibited in such a work". He ridiculed Croft's<sup>10</sup> pretentious attempt to "correct all Johnson's errors, supply all his defects, and produce the most finished and perfect specimen of lexicography that has ever appeared in any language or in any country."<sup>11</sup> As early as 1793 Ritson began the preparation of his own dictionary but "for want of vigor of mind was forced to lay it aside." He recurred to it in his later years but did not complete it, although the manuscript was described in his sale catalogue as "intended for publication."

During this non-productive period Ritson was devoting as much time and energy to his favorite pursuits as the state of his health would

<sup>8</sup>Edmund Spenser, *Three proper and wittie, familiar Letters: lately passed between two university men: touching the earthquake in April last, and our English reformed versifying*, London, 1580.

<sup>9</sup>Thomas Blage, *Schole of Wise Conceytes*, a book of Aesopian fables.

<sup>10</sup>Sir Herbert Croft (1751-1816) busied himself with the preparation of an English dictionary from 1786 or 1787 until 1793, when he was forced to abandon it for want of subscribers. He seems to have had no clear calling to the task in hand.

<sup>11</sup>*Letters*, I, p. 213.



permit. His reputation as an antiquary and as a student of the older forms of poetry caused his old friends to call upon him frequently for assistance in their various undertakings and led to the formation of new friendships with men of kindred interests. He was himself constantly seeking here and there for additional material for the projects he had in hand and asking verification of conclusions on the meaning of words and the dates of pieces of poetry. With Paton, Walker, Harrison, Chalmers, and others he continued his correspondence on literary subjects, though with less regularity than formerly. Knowing of Ritson's early concern with and his continued interest in the antiquities of his native town, John Brewster, clergyman at Stockton, sought his aid in compiling material for his *Parochial History and Antiquities of Stockton-upon-Tees*, published in 1796. Ritson furnished a great part of the material for this volume but afterward expressed regret that he had done so because Brewster had handled it in a woefully unintelligent manner.<sup>12</sup>

The enlarging of the circle of his friendships proved very beneficial to Ritson. With David Macpherson (1746-1816) he exchanged Scottish etymologies, and although himself in keenly distressing circumstances he offered Macpherson real encouragement in the latter's difficulties.<sup>13</sup> He received valuable assistance in translating from Robert Surtees<sup>14</sup> and found himself indebted to William Laing for repeated aid in obtaining scarce volumes.<sup>15</sup> The greatest boon, however, came when he made the acquaintance of Sir Walter Scott.

In 1800, or thereabouts,<sup>16</sup> Scott applied to Ritson for aid in compiling materials for his projected *Border Minstrelsy*. He had previously appealed to Percy, but the prelate expressed only a mild interest in the undertaking. After a period of hesitation induced by Ritson's avowed hatred of Scotchmen and the known virulence of his lan-

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, II, pp. 125, 127. See Henry Heavisides, *Annals of Stockton-on-Tees; with biographical notices*, Stockton-on-Tees, 1865, for curious anecdotes regarding Brewster's ignorance of antiquities.

It was probably during this same period that Ritson made some progress toward a life of Wharton. His copy of *The Life and Writings of Philip late Duke of Wharton*, 2 vols., London, 1732, which included the *Memoirs of the Life of his Grace Philip late Duke of Wharton*, By an Impartial Hand, London, 1731, interleaved with copious manuscript notes and supplied with transcripts of several of the Duke's poems furnished with notes, is in Mr. Perry's collection.

<sup>13</sup>*Letters*, II, p. 197.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, II, p. 241.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, *passim*.

<sup>16</sup>The exact date is unknown. Lockhart places the beginning of the correspondence in 1800-01. *Life of Scott*, II, p. 54.

guage toward those he disliked, and against the advice of Ellis, Scott decided to seek Ritson's aid.<sup>17</sup> Apparently to the surprise of himself and his friends he met with "the readiest, kindest, and most liberal assistance."<sup>18</sup> His suave courtesy, his frank praise of Ritson's industry and accuracy, his unflinching tact in avoiding everything suggestive of a controversy completely disarmed Ritson and led him to communicate the stores of his valuable learning in a gracious and friendly manner. The correspondence thus begun continued uninterruptedly throughout the remaining years of Ritson's life and was supplemented by at least one pleasant personal meeting. In the autumn of 1802 Ritson visited Scott at Lasswade cottage. Dr. John Leyden, the crude Scottish poet, was present on this occasion and by his rudeness of manner somewhat irritated the more delicate sensibilities of Ritson. Despite this unpleasant circumstance, Ritson treasured the memory of the visit among his most delightful recollections and hoped constantly for an opportunity to repeat it. Lockhart's ill-natured abuse of Ritson on the occasion of this visit has given rise to a misunderstanding of the nature of the relationship between him and his two Scottish friends.<sup>19</sup> There was no permanent breach between him and Leyden. He frequently spoke in praise of his "inestimable friend" Leyden, and seems to have forgotten entirely their early unpleasantness. Of his connection with Scott there can be no doubt. Not only his own letters but Scott's frequently repeated praise prove them to have been on constantly friendly terms.

The extant correspondence proves Scott and Ritson to have been mutually helpful in their respective compilations. Despite his illness, Ritson reveals in these letters an unsubdued zeal for his work, and his manner is always deferential and unassuming. He seems to feel that he has at last met his superior in medieval learning. When he received a copy of the first edition of the *Minstrelsy* he thanked Scott in glowing terms for "the most curious and valuable literary treasure I possess. Everything is excellent throughout, both in verse and prose." He declared his intention of reading it charily, one ballad a day, thus extending his "exquisite gratification to the most distant period."<sup>20</sup> It was with obvious hesitation that he ventured to suggest a "few trifling remarks, in contemplation of a second edition."<sup>22</sup> Had the *Minstrelsy* con-

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup>Scott's statement quoted by Surtees, *Op. Cit.*, III, p. 194, note q.

<sup>19</sup>See Lockhart, *Op. Cit.*, I, pp. 330, 358; *Encyc. Brit.*, art. "Ritson"; *British Critic*, Vol. LV, pp. 581-93; *Constable and his Literary Correspondents*, I, pp. 495-7.

<sup>20</sup>*Letters*, II, p. 222 ff.; Surtees, *Op. Cit.*, III, p. 194, note r.

<sup>21</sup>Although everything he wrote was in high praise of the *Minstrelsy*, yet Ritson felt that Scott had taken unfair advantage of him by printing from the Brown MS. several ballads which he had himself transcribed with the full knowl-

tained a copy of "Sir Tristrem", as Scott originally intended it should, Ritson would no doubt have had some very pertinent remarks to make on it. For it appears from the following hitherto unnoticed letter that, even before the completion of the *Minstrelsy*, Ritson had discovered the poem, made extracts from it, estimated its age and origin, propounded the most plausible theory yet advanced for a definite authorship of it, and supported his theory by all the available internal and by almost all the corroborative external evidence which the subsequent century of scholarly investigation has sufficed to unearth.

To the question of the authorship of "Sir Tristrem" there has not been, and probably can never be, a definitive answer. The theory held by Ritson and propounded by Scott (in his edition of 1804) that the "Thomas" mentioned in the first lines of the romance was in all probability its author, was too simple to go long unchallenged. In their anxiety to prove all things scholars have explored the hidden, labyrinthian paths and have been prone to ignore the plain and straight ways, if for no other reason than because they were obvious. And so, after Scott's declaration that "The Romance of *Sir Tristrem* was composed by Thomas of Erceldoune, called the Rhymer, who flourished in the thirteenth century", came the testimony of such men as Price, Wright, Paris, Hazlitt, Halliwell, Garnett, Murray, Schofield, and Kölbing to prove—not that some other person was the author of the poem, but simply that Thomas was *not* its composer. In McNeill, the latest editor of the romance, critical judgment seems to be swinging back to the common-sense position taken by Ritson and Scott. After reviewing carefully the evidence and the arguments in favor of an unknown author other than Thomas of Erceldoune, McNeill concludes thus:

"Broadly viewed, the question of the authorship of the poem is one which, from the nature of the evidence, must be answered in accordance rather with reasonable probability than with absolute demonstration; and the reasonable probability is that Robert Mannyng of Brunne was right when he ascribed the poem to Thomas of Erceldoune."<sup>22</sup>

How ably Ritson had analyzed the available evidence is revealed in the following letter, and how thoroughly he had anticipated Scott's edge and consent of Thomas Gordon. See manuscript of 102 pp. in Ritson's best hand, comprising fifteen ballads and a copy of a letter of Thomas Gordon to Alexander Fraser Tytler under date of January 15, 1793. To the Table of Contents Ritson has appended the following note: "Many of these ballads have been since publish'd, from the same manuscript, in 'The Minstrelsy of the Scottish-border'; whether deserve'dly, or not, i shal not now say." MS. in Mr. Perry's library.

<sup>22</sup>G. P. McNeill, *Sir Tristrem*, Edinburgh and London, 1886, for the Scottish Text Society.

conclusions is seen upon comparison of the letter with Scott's Introduction to his *Sir Tristrem*. Just what is the degree of Scott's indebtedness to Ritson cannot now be definitely determined. The letter unfortunately bears no address. It was no doubt written to one who could and probably did communicate its contents to Scott prior to the appearance of his *Sir Tristrem* in 1804. But even though Scott knew nothing of Ritson's letter on the romance, the fact remains that Ritson antedated Scott's conclusions by nearly three years.

Laing II, 589.

Dear Sir,

The romance of *Sir Tristrem*, if admitted to be the production of Thomas of Ercildon, i may be well enough said to have discovered, as i know of none who had anticipated my conjecture though i have not been permitted to announce that discovery myself.<sup>23</sup> It is extant in a most valuable, but shockingly mutilated, MS. in the library of the faculty of advocates at Edinburg, marked W.4.1. and presented by the late lord Auchinleck, in 1744; its age, to the best of my judgment being about the year 1400,<sup>24</sup> and, evidently compiled and written in England.<sup>25</sup> The reasons from which i infer this imperfect romance to be the work of the ancient Scottish bard already mentioned are these: Robert of Brunne, in the prologue to his metrical version of Peter Langetoft, says,<sup>26</sup>

"I see in song in sedgeyng tale  
Of *Erceldown*, & of *Kendale*,  
Non tham says as thai tham wrought,  
& in ther saying it seems nocht.  
That may thou here in *Sir Tristrem*,  
Over gastes it has the steem,  
Over all that is or was,  
If men it sayd as made *Thomas*.

But I here it no man so say,  
That of some cople is away.  
So therefare saying here beforne.

. . . . .

<sup>23</sup>Probably because of ill health holding back his publications.

<sup>24</sup>Modern critical opinion places the MS. at an earlier date. Most students go with McNeill in placing it at the beginning of the 14th century; some agree with Murray in setting it at the middle of the century. Scott refers it to "the earlier part of the fourteenth century".

<sup>25</sup>On this point there is no difference of opinion. On the question of the origin of the romance, Ritson would, of course, agree with the theory that the English version is from a Norman or Anglo-Norman source. He frequently contended, as did Tyrwhitt and Warton, that there exists no English romance which is not derived, directly or indirectly, from a French original.

<sup>26</sup>ll, 93-104, 109-112. Scott quotes these lines.

Thai says in so *quaynte Inglis*,  
 That many one wate not what is,  
 Therefore heuyed wele the more  
 In *strange ryme* to travayle sore."

I shall now proceed to gratify your curiosity, by a transcript of the first stanza, which will serve at the same time, to illustrate the censure of the English critick, and to ascertain the title of the Scotch poet. It runs thus:

"I was at *Ercildoun* (To supply by conjecture, what is illegible.)  
 With *Thomas* spak y thare,  
 Ther herd y rede in roun,  
 Who *Tristrem* gat & bare,  
 Who was king with croun,  
 And who him fostered zare,  
 And who was bold baroun,  
 As thair elders ware  
 Bi zere:  
 Tomas telles in toun  
 this aventours as thai were."

This is a specimen of such "quaynte Inglis", and such "strange ryme", as there is no other instance of; and, with the other extracts i have made from this venerable relique<sup>27</sup> (which, by the way, i had neither time nor convenience to transcribe at length), sufficiently proves, at least to my own conviction, that this is the identical poem alluded to in the above passage of Robert Mannyng. In further support of the authorship, i can also cite the fragment of an ancient romance in French metre upon the same subject, in the possession of Mr. Douce, in which the Scoto-English performance is apparently criticized under the name of *Thomas*.<sup>28</sup> The objection made, by some, against this opinion, is, that the poem speaks of *Thomas*, in the *third* person, as one from whom he states himself to have received his materials: but for this singularity (if it be one), the authors caprice must be responsible. It seems, in fact, to have been, if not the peculiar, at least the notorious practise, of this popular rimer: as in two more modern poems, always ascribed to, but not, i believe, actually written by him, he is introduced in the same manner: one of these mentioned by Lord Hailes, you most probably have in the Scottish prophecys, the other, an imperfect MS. in the Cotton library, & Lincoln cathedral, has not been printed.<sup>29</sup> Besides, Maistre Wace, more than once, speaks

<sup>27</sup>They appear not to have been made use of.

<sup>28</sup>The Douce fragments were edited by Francisque Michel, *Tristan: Recueil de ce qui reste des poèmes relatifs à ses aventures composés en François en Anglo-Normand et en Grec dans les xiii<sup>e</sup> et xiiii<sup>e</sup> siècles*, London, 1835, and described by A. E. Curdy, *La Folie Tristan, an Anglo-Norman Poem*, Baltimore, 1902. Scott cited extracts from the fragments (Introd., pp. 42-4) in support of the point Ritson makes here.

<sup>29</sup>It was printed by Laing as "Thomas of Ersseldoune", in *Ancient Popular Poetry of Scotland*. Second edition revised by W. C. Hazlitt, 1895, pp. 81-111.

of himself in the same manner, tho' at other times in the first person; and this identical objection is alleged, by Bishop Watson, against the cavils of Thomas Paine, as a strong argument in favour of the four evangelists, after the example of Caesar, Xenophon, and other ancient historians:<sup>80</sup> which is all i have at present to say upon the subject. I understand, however, that some gentlemen, at Edinburgh, have transcribed the entire poem for the purpose of publication, which i should, in fact, have done myself, tho' without the like advantages, had it not been mutilated and imperfect.<sup>81</sup>

I put into your hands a few years ago an alphabetical list of the names of British rivers, which, if it would be of any service to you, and has already performed it, i should be obliged to you to leave for me at Egertons any time it may be convenient.<sup>82</sup>

I am,  
Dear sir,  
Very respectfully & sincerely yours  
J. Ritson.

Gray's inn,  
26th June 1801.

When one recalls that Scott's views on the subject of ballad deception were, like those of his age, lax, and his practise even more remiss, one wonders what has become of the Ritson whose main object in life seemed to be to expose and to ridicule the liberties taken by editors of medieval poetry. That Ritson had not, at this period of life, given over his enmity to editorial laxity is evinced by his latest publications. Scott alone of all the collectors of ballads wholly escaped his ire. The poet's good fortune was undoubtedly due in large measure to the bland manner in which he treated Ritson. Scott himself, perhaps disturbed by an accusing conscience, was fearful lest Ritson should discover the extent to which he had indulged in textual liberties and attack him with his customary violence. In 1802 he wrote to Ellis:

"As for Mr. Ritson, he and I still continue on decent terms; and, in truth, he makes *patte de velours*; but I dread I shall see 'a whisker and then a claw' stretched out against my unfortunate lucubrations."<sup>83</sup>

<sup>80</sup>Richard Watson, *Apology for the Bible . . . Letters to Thomas Paine*, 1796, directed against Paine's "Second Part".

<sup>81</sup>This no doubt alludes to the copy which formed the basis of Scott's edition. Ritson's veneration for Scott probably led him here to underestimate his own ability as a transcriber. Had he copied the whole poem for publication it would certainly not have been less perfect than Scott's version, which, according to Köbling, swarms with errors. *Die nordische und die englische version der Tristan-saga*, Heilbronn, 1878-92.

<sup>82</sup>This unpublished MS. is now Douce 340, in the Bodleian Library: "A list of river names in Great Britain and Ireland, with a few etymological notes on them".

<sup>83</sup>Lockhart, *Op. Cit.*, II, p. 87.

The stimulus which came from his correspondence with men actively engaged in literary pursuits no doubt operated to revive Ritson's waning interest to the point where he began again to publish. Despite steadily declining health he managed, with great suffering, to see three books through the press in 1802 and to bring several others to completion. Each one of them is disfigured by his peculiar orthography, and all are marred by extravagances in idea and statement. The condition of his mind serves in large measure to explain if not to excuse the extreme violence which characterizes much of the language of these volumes. All the dislikes which he had earlier expressed, all the eccentricities which he had formerly exhibited, are here reiterated with the cocksureness of conceit and egotism run riot. The *Essay on Abstinence from Animal Food* has already been mentioned and will be treated later; the other two works appeared simultaneously.

*Bibliographia Poetica; a catalogue of English poets of the twelfth, thirteenth, fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centurys, with a short account of their works*, was the product of several years of labor. It was originally undertaken at the suggestion of Steevens, who was unable to fill out a list of authors' initials submitted by Thomas Park. With the assistance of "the bibliographical labors of Leland, Bale, Pits, Wood, and Tanner", the "ingenious though too frequently inaccurate *History of English Poetry*", Herbert's enlarged and improved edition of Ames's *Typographical Antiquities*, and his own transcript of the registers of the Stationers' company, "obligingly furnished by mister Chalmers",<sup>84</sup>

<sup>84</sup>The following letters concern the borrowing of the transcript.

Add. MSS. 22900, f. 404.

Dear Sir,

Understanding that you have purchased Mr. Herbert's transcript of the Stationers-books, I presume upon your experienced liberality to solicit the loan, for a few days, of the first volume, either now or when you can better spare it; with liberty, if you please, to extract such entries of ballads as Herbert has not already printed.

I am, Dear sir,

Very respectfully & sincerely yours

J. Ritson.

Gray's-inn,  
15th. Dec. 98.  
George Chalmers esquire,  
Green-street.

together with numerous books and titles from the libraries of his friends,<sup>35</sup> and especially with critical suggestions from Douce and Park, Ritson worked out a catalogue surprisingly full and accurate for that day.

It would seem that Ritson entered upon the preparation of this volume in collaboration with Douce but completed it alone, using extensively the material collected by his friend. A manuscript of "Materials for a biography of English poets to the end of the sixteenth century, collected by J. R. and F. D." now in the Bodleian, is entirely in Douce's hand.<sup>36</sup> Its plan is the same as that of *Bibliographia Poetica*: the authors

Montagu d. 15, f. 220.

Gray's-inn, 20th Decem. 1798.

Dear Sir,

I return your first volume, with a thousand thanks; and flatter myself it has not been detained beyond your expectation. As you appear not to have finished your examination of the second, perhaps you could part with it more conveniently at a future time, for which I should wait with pleasure. If, however, the present be equally agreeable, you may rely on the utmost dispatch from,

Dear Sir,

Very sincerely yours,

J. Ritson

P. S. "The Clarkes booke", I perceive, wch contained the entrys from 22d July 1571 to 1576 is still missing; nor now likely, I conclude, ever to be found. Another book, with a white cover, occasionally refer'd to, is, doubtless, in the same predicament.

George Chalmers esquire, Green-street.

Add. MSS. 22901, f. 13.

Dear Sir,

I return you the concluding volumes of Mr. Herberts transcript, & shall ever retain the most grateful sense of so considerable a favor.

Upon Mr. Steevens's application to I know not what members of the stationers company, they agreed to let me have the use of these books in their own hall, but had determined, it seems, that they should no more go abroad into private hands. As the terms were inconvenient, I did not accept the offer; & have thereby had an opportunity of being much more pleasingly indebted to your superior liberality.

I remain, Dear sir,

Your most obliged & respectful

humble servant,

J. Ritson.

Grays-inn,

29th Jany. 1799.

<sup>35</sup>See S. E. Brydges, *Censura Literaria*, London, 1805-9, I, p. 54.

<sup>36</sup>MS. Douce, e, 5.



are arranged alphabetically by centuries, and there is a list of English translators and a supplement. Presumably Douce undertook to arrange his own and Ritson's notes in this volume, and after their estrangement Ritson enlarged and altered Douce's material for his own published book. Apropos of the disruption of his friendship with Ritson, which resulted in breaking their collaboration on this volume, Douce wrote to Ellis:

"We have taken a formal leave of each other—under our hands and seals, probably forever. We complained of each other's cavilling and contradictory tempers, which accidentally colliding with no common violence produced the irreparable breach."<sup>37</sup>

Ritson allowed this misunderstanding to prevent his openly acknowledging his obligations to Douce. There is, however, in the Advertisement to *Bibliographia Poetica* a veiled compliment of which Douce considers himself the subject. It reads:

"That the compilation is more extensive, accurate and minute than it otherwise could have been, is owing to the kind attention, and literary exertions, of a very learned and ingenious friend, to whom the public is not less indebted than the editor."

To this sentence, Douce, in his copy of the printed work, added: "Originally F. D.[ouce] but he [i. e. Ritson] afterwards cancelled the name from a bit of spite."

Throughout the course of *Bibliographia Poetica* there are many references to Douce, but Ritson was probably only slightly less indebted to Thomas Park, many of whose notes, signed "T. P.", are included. Park corrected Ritson's manuscripts twice and added so much valuable material that Ritson volunteered to divide the profits of the sale with him.<sup>38</sup> The first draft of the Preface contained a joint acknowledgment of the assistance rendered by Douce and Park, but when Ritson's altercation with Douce caused the latter's name to be stricken out, Park asked that his be omitted also. This was accordingly done, and in his ingratitude Ritson neglected even to send Park a copy of the printed work.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup>Add. MSS. 28099, f. 47. This letter bears no date beyond "Monday eve". That it was written later than Feb. 1, 1801, is proved by another letter of Douce to Ellis in the same MS., f. 30, which bears that date and in which Douce expresses his interest in procuring Nicol as publisher for Ritson's book.

<sup>38</sup>Park to Percy, Nov. 5, 1803, Nichols, *Lit. Illust.*, VIII, p. 376.

<sup>39</sup>For Park's version of his connection with *Bibliographia Poetica* see Haslewood, *Op. Cit.*, p. 23 ff.

*Bibliographia Poetica* was intended as a register of every poetical writer to the end of the sixteenth century. Ritson endeavored to list every poet, whether of renown, as Chaucer and Spenser, or whether known only for a translation in English verse of a Latin poem, or for a single ballad sheet or other promiscuous verse; dramatic pieces were excluded in order not to encroach upon the field occupied by Baker's *Biographia Dramatica*. His avowed concern was with names, titles, and dates. He gave the outstanding facts of an author's life, where such were known, but made no attempt to write biography. Neither did he undertake the rôle of critic, but he frequently called attention to the errors of previous historians of the period and occasionally dropped casual comments on an author or his work. These remarks bear always the stamp of Ritson's individuality and usually reveal keen judgment. His estimate of Lydgate and his voluminous productions is characteristic.

"But, in truth, and fact, these stupid and fatiguing productions which by no means deserve the name of poetry, and their still more stupid and disgusting author, who disgraces the name and patronage of his master Chaucer, are neither worth . . . . collecting nor even worthy of preservation." In his "elaborate drawings there are scarcely three lines together of pure and accurate meter."<sup>40</sup>

This condemnation comes at the end of twenty-four pages devoted to Lydgate, in which 251 titles are listed. Ritson is by no means certain that his list is exhaustive or that it does not contain works wrongly attributed, but he is justified in proclaiming it to be "the completest list that can be formed, without access at least, to every manuscript library in the kingdom."<sup>41</sup> His own estimate of his work has been substantiated by time. The Lydgate list contains many works of Chaucer and other contemporaries, and a single work is occasionally multiplied by two, three, or even four, by means of the repetition of varying titles. But, "with all its imperfections on its head", it remains a monument of industry. Necessarily faulty to a degree, it was a marvelous achievement for its day, and while modern scholars have done much toward perfecting the list of Lydgate's works, they have not yet made it definitive.<sup>42</sup> To the dry and thankless task of chronicling names and titles Ritson brought a breadth of knowledge and a thoroughness of method which made his work as little liable to error as it is possible for that of any pioneer to be.

<sup>40</sup>*Bibliographia Poetica*, p. 88.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>42</sup>H. M. MacCracken, *The Lydgate Canon*, London, 1908, corrected Schick's chronology in *Lydgate's Temple of Glass*, London, 1891, but does not consider his own catalogue exhaustive.

Ritson's outburst against the "drivelling" Monk of Bury-St. Edmund is given with his usual exaggeration, but his judgment of Lydgate's poetic ability persists well into the present day.<sup>43</sup> Despite the marvelous advance of interest in ancient English poetry, Lydgate was pretty generally neglected during the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century, and Ritson's pronouncement undoubtedly had its influence in perpetuating this neglect. The effect of his words concerning "Piers Plowman" was likewise noticeable.

Up to the publication of *Bibliographia Poetica* "Piers Plowman" had been known in only one form—that now known as the B-text.<sup>44</sup> In investigating the numerous manuscripts of this poem, Ritson was struck with the degree in which some of them differed from the printed copies. "In order to enable any curious person to distinguish at first sight to which of the two editions (as one may call them) any new manuscripts he may happen to meet with belongs", Ritson quotes the opening lines of the B- and C-texts. The variations, he thinks, may be due to the fact that at some time the author revised his original work, "giving as it were a new edition." Without attempting any statement of priority, he conceives that "it may be possible for a good judge of ancient poetry, possessed of a sufficient stock of critical acumen, to determine which was the first and which was the second."<sup>45</sup> Manuscripts of "Piers Plowman" were so numerous (there are not less than forty-five extant today) that it is not surprising that even Ritson failed to collate all of them from beginning to end. This probably accounts for his failure to discover that the poem exists in three distinct forms instead of two. He perhaps compared A-text manuscripts only through the opening lines in which they agree closely with B, while the two manuscripts he selected for thorough comparison happened to be a B-text and a C-text.<sup>46</sup> Although

<sup>43</sup>Saintsbury remarks, *History of Prosody*, p. 221, note: "Some of Lydgate's recent German editors and champions have been nearly as severe on Ritson himself. There is nothing to be said for his temper or his manners; but the man who knew what he knew a hundred years ago is not to be belittled by those who have profited (or not) by nearly four generations of his and others' labors."

<sup>44</sup>It was first edited by Robert Crowley in 1550, and again by Owen Rogers in 1661.

<sup>45</sup>*Bibliographia Poetica*, p. 29, note.

<sup>46</sup>Ritson mentions nine separate manuscripts, at least two of which are of A-version, and speaks in general of "others". The present highly unsatisfactory state of the text may be gathered from Knott's account of his preparation of a critical text of the A-version from the fourteen imperfect MSS. extant. "An Essay toward the Critical text of the A-version of 'Piers Plowman'," *Modern Philology*, Vol. XII, pp. 129-61.

it was nearly a quarter of a century before the A-text was discovered,<sup>47</sup> it was Ritson who laid the foundation for the "Piers Plowman" problem.<sup>48</sup>

Ritson entertained no delusion concerning the exhaustiveness of his labors in compiling *Bibliographia Poetica*; his chief ambition was to make a useful catalogue of the early English poets, with the hope that it would be corrected and supplemented by other students. The value of the work has been generally recognized<sup>49</sup> although some critics have insisted on citing only its inaccuracies and, by ignoring its purpose, censuring it for affording only "dry and uninteresting reading."<sup>50</sup> Almost immediately upon its publication "corrections" and "additions" began to appear, and Joseph Haslewood undertook a new edition, which was never put to press.<sup>51</sup>

At the same time with the preparation of *Bibliographia Poetica*, Ritson was collecting material for a catalogue of Scottish writers upon a similar plan. He called upon Scott<sup>52</sup> and other friends for assistance in this project and succeeded in preparing the copy for the printer but did not live to publish it. The manuscript, entitled "Bibliographia Scotica; Anecdotes, Biographical and Literary, of Scottish writers, Historians, and Poets from the earliest accounts to the nineteenth century", was a desideratum with Scott,<sup>53</sup> and with Chalmers, who intended to publish it.<sup>54</sup> It was bought over both these men by Longman and Rees and since 1875 has disappeared from sight.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>47</sup>Price, in his edition of Warton's *History*, 1824, discovered the A-text and arranged the versions in their proper order.

<sup>48</sup>For the genesis of this problem see Samuel Moore's "Studies in 'Piers Plowman,'" *Mod. Philol.*, Vol. XI, pp. 177-93. Moore states that the "tradition" to which Jusserand appeals in attempting to shift the burden of proof to the shoulders of Manly began with Price; yet it had its partial but definite origin in Ritson's discovery of the C-text.

<sup>49</sup>See *Dibden's Director*, I, pp. 126-8; Brydges, *Restituta*, II, p. 10; "The English Chaucerians", *Cambridge Hist. of Eng. Lit.*

<sup>50</sup>See *Dict. Nat. Biog.*, art. "Lydgate"; Brydges, *Censura Literaria*, I, p. 158.

<sup>51</sup>This was no doubt the work announced in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for October, 1814, "to be put to press next year". Many of Haslewood's corrections appeared over his initials in *Censura Lit.*, V, pp. 131-6; VI, pp. 29-34.

<sup>52</sup>See *Letters*, II, p. 241.

<sup>53</sup>Scott to Ellis, Oct. 14, 1803, Lockhart's *Scott*, II, p. 136; Park to Hill, Dec. 8, 1803, Add. MSS., 20083, f. 118.

<sup>54</sup>Chalmers to Constable, Oct. 27, and Dec. 27, 1803, *Constable and his Lit. Corresp.*, I, pp. 410-12, 502.

<sup>55</sup>*Notes and Queries*, Ser. 5, Vol. X, pp. 287, 412.

The work for which the printer held up the publication of *Bibliographia Poetica* that they might both appear together<sup>56</sup> was *Ancient Engleish Metrical Romanceës*, in three volumes. Throughout the work, and especially in the prefatory "Dissertation on Romance and Minstrelsy", are to be found numerous vicious slurs upon the accuracy and integrity of Percy, Pinkerton, and Warton, and violent attacks upon Christianity, all of which must be traced to the morbid state of mind induced by Ritson's illness. The copy first submitted for the "Dissertation" contained a number of derogatory allusions to Christianity which were so virulent that Nicol refused to print it without alteration. Accordingly a dozen of the worst passages were deleted or modified before publication.<sup>57</sup> The melancholy sentence with which the Advertisement concludes affords abundant evidence of Ritson's mental condition.

"Brought to an end with much industry and more attention, in a continued state of ill health and low spirits, the editor abandons it to general censure, with cold indifference, expecting little favor, and less profit; but certain, at any rate, to be insulted by the malignant and calumnious personalities of a base and prostitute gang of lurking assassins, who stab in the dark, and whose poisoned daggers he has already experienced."

There is somewhat more than a tincture of irony in Ritson's professing to take from Percy the suggestion for a compilation on almost every page of which that worthy prelate is branded as a literary forger and an editorial malefactor. This irony is obvious in his appropriating Percy's remarks on the value and importance of a judicious collection of ancient metrical histories and romances, "accurately published, with proper illustrations", as praise of his own collection. To the eloquent commendation of this learned and ingenious writer, he says, nothing need be added in favor of the present publication.

Besides the historical Dissertation, in many ways the most interesting and in some respects the most important part of the work, *Metrical Romances* consists of twelve romances, with "Horn Childe and Maiden Rimnild" added as an Appendix to the second volume. The pieces are printed from the most ancient sources available, a few from black letter copies, more from manuscripts. The work is done with Ritson's customary accuracy; variant readings and editorial emendations are noted with scholarly care. It is not, however, perfect. There are obvious blunders in the text; there are errors of judgment in the critical introductions; and there are mistakes and gaps in the glossary<sup>58</sup>.

<sup>56</sup>Park to Hill, May 26, 1802, Add. Mss., 20083, f. 54.

<sup>57</sup>These cancelled passages were subsequently printed on separate sheets which may be found bound in a very few copies of the first edition. See Appendix B.

<sup>58</sup>Skeat pointed out fifteen "peculiar blunders" but praised the glossary as a noteworthy example of pioneer scholarship. See *N. and Q.*, Ser. 8, Vol. II, p. 3.

But the whole is a remarkably accurate production for its day and reflects credit upon the erudition and scholarship of the editor.

Chestre's beautiful fairy tale, "Launfal", had just previously appeared among Ellis's notes to Way's translation of Le Grand's *Fabliaux*,<sup>59</sup> and Ritson does not justify his reprinting it here. There are several explanations of troublesome passages given with a "not as mister Ellis says" which would indicate that the romance was given primarily with the peevish purpose of correcting Ellis. A similar reason seems to account for the insertion of "Lybeaus Disconus", which Percy had printed in the *Reliques* as from a copy in his folio manuscript. In the general revision of the *Reliques* for the fourth edition, this romance was made to conform more closely to its original, and the editor's remarks concerning it were altered accordingly. Ritson, who was perhaps more directly responsible than any one else for this general overhauling of the *Reliques*, declared that Percy's treatment of "Lybeaus Disconus" in the fourth edition was such as to destroy confidence in what he had advanced concerning it in the third. Ritson accordingly printed it from the Caligula manuscript for the double purpose of discomfiting Percy and exhibiting a more perfect copy of the romance.

Purely personal considerations play no part in the work with the remaining pieces, which were included on their merits alone. Ritson's conjectures on the sources of these romances were not always as definite as might be wished, but his general theory that they could all be traced to French originals was not far wrong. He did not connect "The Knight of Curtesy and the Fair Lady of Faguell" with the "Chatelain de Coucy", upon which it is founded. He could find no single original for either "Le Bone Florence" or "The Squyre of Lowe Degre", though he considered it more than probable that one had actually existed in the former case and was opposed to the theory of Percy and Warton that "a romance of 'The Squyr of Lowe Degre' is alluded to in the *Rime of Sir Topas*". In contradiction of Percy, who judged "The Geste of Kyng Horn" to be "of genuine English growth", Ritson derives it from a French original. In this estimate he had the support of Tyrwhitt and Warton, and was later followed by Morris and others.<sup>60</sup> This theory was long questioned, but finally overthrown only in 1876 by Wissman.<sup>61</sup> In the matter of dates Ritson was more nearly correct than previous editors, but many of his conclusions have had to be modified as inves-

<sup>59</sup>Le Grand D'Aussy, *Fabliaux or Tales, abridged from French manuscripts of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries*. Selected and translated by G. L. Way. London, 1800.

<sup>60</sup>See O. Hartenstein, *Studien zur Hornsage*, Heidelberg, 1902.

<sup>61</sup>Wissman, *King Horn*, Strassburg, 1876.

tigations in the field brought more information to hand. "Ywaine and Gawain" is to be placed in the first half of the fourteenth century rather than at its close, as Ritson thought.<sup>62</sup> His vague statement that "The King of Tars" is apparently of the fourteenth century can be made definite for the first third of the century.<sup>63</sup> "The Geste of Kyng Horn" he rightly considered to be the oldest Middle English romance which has been preserved.

If Ritson had not already passed beyond the stage at which he cared much what happened to his books when they were published—and his Advertisement indicates that he had passed this stage—the cold reception accorded *Metrical Romances* by the public must have been very disappointing to him.<sup>64</sup> And his chagrin must have been increased when he recalled that in deference to him George Ellis had not only generously relinquished his own projected edition of ancient romances but had successfully exerted himself in obtaining Nicol as publisher for *Metrical Romances*. This was no easy task, when publishers were reported to "groan in spirit over the peculiarities of Ritson's orthography".<sup>65</sup> There can be little doubt that Ritson's wide acquaintance with medieval literature, especially in manuscript sources, his unwearying faculty for research, and his advanced editorial standards, gave him superior claim to the work in hand. But it is equally indisputable that he lacked the taste and judgment of Ellis and was certain to produce a book less readily appreciated. Ellis was not, however, permanently denied the field. Upon Ritson's publication falling into almost immediate neglect, and on the solicitation of friends, he took up again his original plan. Early in 1804 Percy asked Thomas Park to undertake a revision of Ritson's work, proffering the use of his own extensive collection of romances. Park declined for two reasons.

"One is that I think Ritson's plan injudicious and his execution of it repulsive: whence his book is likely to prove unsalable. The other is that my highly esteemed and respected friend, Mr. George Ellis, is preparing for publication a general analysis of English metrical romances, intermingled with extracts from the ancient copies, which are curious for the illustration of manners, meter, or language, and which will certainly, prove, like his *Specimens of our lyric poesy*, a very popular book."

<sup>62</sup>W. H. Schofield, *English Literature from the Norman Conquest to Chaucer*, New York, 1906, p. 230.

<sup>63</sup>A. Gough, *On the Middle English Metrical Romance of Emare*, Kiel, 1900.

<sup>64</sup>Almost without exception the reviewers devoted themselves to the Dissertation and found little or nothing there to commend. See *British Critic*, September 1804 and January 1805; *Critical Review*, Vol. XXXIX, pp. 179-87; *Edinburgh Review*, Vol. VII, pp. 387-413.

<sup>65</sup>Scott to Ellis, Lockhart's *Scott*, II, p. 87.

Attention was first called to the general subject of romances by Percy in his "Essay on the Ancient Metrical Romances."<sup>66</sup> Warton's great taste for medieval poetry led him to investigate romances somewhat in detail, but the first comprehensive work upon the subject was that by Ritson. Yet it remained for Ellis's *Specimens of Early English Romances in Metre*, 1805, to arouse a popular interest in the subject which secured for Ritson's collection the attention it deserved.

Ritson intended for publication in the year 1785 a collection of Scottish poetry entitled *The Caledonian Muse*. Like a great many of his books, it was printed in installments, as he had the habit of beginning printing before he had all the copy ready. Although this volume was not ready for publication in 1785, it was nevertheless announced as an issue of that year. Ritson himself referred to this work in his subsequent publications. In the Advertisement to *English Anthology*, 1793, he writes: "The Caledonian Muse, a collection of Scottish poetry, upon a similar plan, printed some years since, though not yet published was, in fact, a subsequent compilation." In a list of books "published by J. Johnson" in *Scottish Songs*, 1794, appears this notice: "The Caledonian Muse, a chronological selection of Scottish poetry, from the earliest times to the present: with notes and a glossary; and elegant vignettes, engraved by Heath, from the designs of Stothard. To which is added, an essay on the author of Christ's Kirk on the Green." The work itself had not yet appeared, and on March 5, 1794, Ritson wrote to Paton:

"The impression of another little volume, of which I believe I shewed you a fragment, entitled 'The Caledonian Muse', which had engaged my attention for a great many years, and was at last got ready for publication, has been lately destroyed by fire in the printer's house; so that I neither possess, nor can procure, one single complete copy. 'Sic transit Gloria mundi.' I am of course meditating a trip to Scotland, to re-collect materials for a new edition."<sup>67</sup>

Ritson's belief that the whole impression was at that time destroyed has been found to be erroneous although it was sufficiently strong in his own mind to cause him to abandon hope of finishing the volume on the original plan. From an incomplete manuscript of "Select Scottish Poems"<sup>68</sup> and some fugitive notes by David Laing,<sup>69</sup> into whose hands

<sup>66</sup>Nichols, *Lit. Illust.*, VIII, p. 377.

<sup>67</sup>*Letters*, II, p. 45; Nichols, *Lit. Illust.*, III, p. 778.

<sup>68</sup>Now in Mr. Perry's library. This MS. was put into the hands of Constable for publication but at the time of Ritson's death only two sheets were in print and it was never completed. See *Constable and his Literary Correspondence*, I, pp. 497-500.

<sup>69</sup>Picked up in a copy of the *Caledonian Muse* in an Edinburgh book shop.



the information concerning it came, it appears that Ritson had actually made some progress in republishing his material under the new title. He seems to have recompiled the text of the different pieces with the oldest manuscripts or the earliest or best editions, to have struck out passages or resolved to omit altogether some of the longer poems which the *Caledonian Muse* contained, and to have added some ancient pieces with which at first he may have been unacquainted. He proceeded in this work until death put an end to his labors, and he never knew that upwards of four hundred copies of such pages of the *Caledonian Muse* as had been printed and probably removed to the publisher's warehouse escaped the fire. In reality only the introductory portion of the work was destroyed. The copies that were saved remained untouched in Johnson's shop until his death in December, 1809, after which they were purchased by Robert Triphook.<sup>70</sup> The only authentic account of the later history of the volume is given in the following letter of Triphook, which unfortunately bears neither address nor date:<sup>71</sup>

Dear Sir

Till this moment I have had no leisure to attend particularly to the Ritson's *Caledonian Muse*. I send you with this a copy complete so far as I have it. Sheet 2. was printed by me in continuation. & the copy for the remainder of the vol. with rather a long Life of Ritson to be prefixed, was sent to Mr. Heber for his perusal some six years ago, but by some unfortunate accident it was either lost or mislaid, and it has remained in the state I now send it ever since.<sup>72</sup> It appears that Ritson (by your letter) had printed to Sheet 2. (these additional sheets were probably destroyed as Waste by Johnson of St. Pauls Churchyard, before I purchased—Of his select Scottish Poems. Hunter who succeeded Johnson, knows nothing—nor have I ever seen a Copy.

The Number of the *Caledonian Muse* is about 420 a few more or less. I have also a Portrait (Shade) of Ritson engraved by me for the purpose of placing with the volume, of which no impressions have yet been taken. I will dispose of the whole to you at two shillings a book & five guineas the copper. Mr. Haslewood (who collected the material for the Life) has a portion of MS. ready transcribed for the press in order to finish the work.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>70</sup>In a note in his edition of Ritson's *English Songs*, p. xciv, Thomas Park says: "Mr. Triphook, jun. bookseller in St. James St. has purchased that portion of *Caledonian Muse* which escaped conflagration, and purposes to complete and publish it, according to the original plan."

<sup>71</sup>This letter is in David Laing's copy of *The Caledonian Muse*, now in Mr. Perry's library.

<sup>72</sup>Since Triphook did not acquire the *Caledonian Muse* before 1810, this statement would place the composition of the letter in 1816 or after.

<sup>73</sup>In Brydges's *British Bibliographer*, Vol. IV, p. 302, appears the following notice signed with the initials "J. H.", evidently Joseph Haslewood: "It is my intention to attempt a conclusion of the last part of Ritson's *Caledonian Muse*, and

Of the volume on Scotland at Brand's Sale. I cannot trace to whom I sold it. The Maunsell's catalogue was sold for cash. If a copy of Chaucer 1532 occurs I will secure it for you

I have purchased of Mr. Chalmers his Edition of Churchyard Chips concerning Scotland—150 copies, which I will sell *en Masse* for 30*l*. I think it would be acceptable in Scotland

May I beg you to forward the enclosed small Packets as directed

I remain

Your obd. Serv.

Robt. Triphook

Old Bond St.

Oct. 12.

Triphook did not succeed in disposing of the work and in 1821 published it himself, with the following title page: *The Caledonian Muse: a chronological collection of Scottish poetry from the earliest times. Edited by the late Joseph Ritson, Esq. With vignettes engraved by Heath, after the designs of Stothard. London: Printed 1785: and now first published, by Robert Triphook, 23 Old Bond Street, 1821.* The "Life" and the proposed additions by Haslewood<sup>74</sup> do not appear, and the publisher states that the only additions to Ritson's material have been a Title and a Portrait.

The *Caledonian Muse* consists of a chronological arrangement of Scottish poetry (songs excluded) in three divisions, comprising respectively: Authentic Poems, Poems by uncertain authors, and Extracts. There are but a few notes and these appear in the first pages of the book. It is to be regretted that Ritson's "Essay on the author of Christ's Kirk on the Green" was destroyed. He contended that the poem was erroneously ascribed to James I.<sup>75</sup> and in this volume attributes it to James V., but his reasons are nowhere to be found.

By the middle of 1803 Ritson had ready for publication an historical volume on King Arthur which he submitted to Longman and Rees for publication. It was rejected for reasons which Ritson himself anticipated in a letter to Scott:

"I have put into Mr. Longman's hand at his own request, for the opinion of some critic he is used to consult, my "Life of King Arthur" but whether the partners to whom I was recommended by our worthy friend Dr. Leyden, will submit the volume within a very short period, to the candor of the sons of Caledonia, rather than suffer any relic of the accurate Ritson to be lost." If the material which Haslewood prepared "within a very short period" is that to which Triphook refers, 1816 would be a highly probable date for his letter.

<sup>74</sup>Haslewood probably used the biographical materials he had collected for this volume in his own *Life and Publications of Ritson*, 1824.

<sup>75</sup>*Scottish Songs*, I, p. xxxvi, note.

undertake the publication, I much doubt, as Mr. Longman thinks my orthography unfavorable to its sale and Mr. Rees was apprehensive I should treat the Welshmen with too much familiarity, an apprehension, I confess, which will turn out to be well founded."<sup>76</sup>

Ritson had no further opportunity to seek a publisher, and the volume did not appear until 1825, with the title, *The Life of King Arthur: from ancient historians and authentic documents*. Joseph Frank, Ritson's nephew, supervised the printing but did no editing save to eliminate the objectionable orthography. He made no attempt at criticism and offered only a single comment on the work:

"The difficulty of the subject may be partly estimated from doubt having been actually entertained by the author, during his early researches, as to the identity of his hero, and fears lest the real Arthur might not, after all, be found:

'So many of his shadows had he met,  
And not the very king.'

In the Preface Ritson concerned himself mainly with demonstrating that Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Britonum* is "a series of palpable and monstrous lies", and that the Britons or Welsh, by professing to believe it authentic have shown themselves to have "more vanity and less judgment than any other people in the world." He ignored altogether the literary importance of Geoffrey's work and seemed to feel that because the *Historia* was a forgery its author deserved nothing but condemnation and abuse. From the absence of any mention of Arthur by historians prior to the twelfth century, Ritson concluded that Geoffrey had invented the whole of his pseudo-history. He admitted that the Bishop may have had the Latin Nennius before him but flatly denied the existence of the Welsh originals. Beyond Nennius and the romance of Charlemagne, he contended that Geoffrey had nothing to draw upon but his own fertile imagination. For support of his charge of infidelity Ritson turned to Geoffrey's contemporaries. He quotes at length from the Preface to William of Newburgh's chonicle,<sup>77</sup> which he considers "not only a criticism of extraordinary merit, for the time, but even the only thing of the kind to be found in ancient English literature." The tone of this Preface is as intemperate as Ritson's own:—"How petulantly and how impudently he [Geoffrey] lies." The testimony of Giraldus Cambrensis,<sup>78</sup> "himself a Welshman and a bishop", who calls the British History a "lying book", is considered by Ritson sufficient to clinch his argument against Geoffrey. It is obvious that Ritson took

<sup>76</sup>Letters, II, p. 238.

<sup>77</sup>*Historia Rerum Anglicarum*, c. 1200, ed. by T. Hearne, Oxford, 1719.

<sup>78</sup>*Descriptio Cambriae*, ed. Powell, London, 1585.

keen delight in his arraignment of Geoffrey. If he recognized the tremendous influence of *Historia Britonum* upon subsequent literature, he studiously avoided any mention of it and seemed obsessed with the idea that fraud or deception on the part of an author destroyed the value of everything he wrote. Such an obsession is, perhaps, a not unnatural product of twenty years' activity in hunting down literary impostors.

In the "Life" of King Arthur proper, Ritson is less the controversialist and more the historical compiler. By implication he is all along rectifying the erroneous statements of Geoffrey, but, with a few exceptions, he avoids comparisons. He has collected a mass of interesting quotations from what he considered authentic historians—Caesar, Tacitus, Leland, Nennius, carefully distinguishing the scholia of Samuel, etc.—and arranged them in chronological order. It was his purpose to present a history of Britain, particularly through the reign of Arthur, and carefully to sift out the authentic facts from the mass of tradition and legend which had accumulated about his hero. In the labor of gathering from remote and obscure sources material on a definite subject, Ritson was unequalled by any one in his day.<sup>79</sup> But he had not the ability to weave his extracts into an interesting and continuous narrative, and he seldom ventured to deduce inferences or draw conclusions. As a result of his merits he has left in this volume a mass of valuable material; but because of his defects it remains only a "mass" fit for reference by the student of a particular subject but of no general interest.

Ritson's interest in Scotland, as revealed by the publication of several volumes of songs and poems, has already been noted. When his prefatory essays in *Scotish Songs* engaged him in dispute with Pinkerton, he began a careful investigation of the history of the early inhabitants of the British Isles, and especially of Scotland. On August 22, 1795 he informed Harrison that he was employing himself "very busily in researches after the Celts, the Picts, and the Scots", adding by way of explanation, "I am quite sick of the modern writers of ancient history, who think to make amends by their fine language for their total want of industry, truth, and candor."<sup>80</sup> The results of this investigation were ultimately published in three volumes under two different titles. The *Annals of the Caledonians, Picts, and Scots; and of Strathclyde, Cumberland, Galloway, and Murray*, in two volumes, was ready for the press by the end of 1801 at which time he wrote to Constable concerning it:

"My annals of the Picts, Scots, Strathclyde Britons, Cumbrians, Galwegians,

<sup>79</sup>Cf. his *Robin Hood*.

<sup>80</sup>*Letters*, II, p. 99.

and men of Murray, in Latin and English, with which I have taken great pains, and which is certainly a very curious book for that sort of learning, is now ready for the press. If you think it would answer for your shop, it is at your service: but I do not wish you to venture upon it, if you are not perfectly satisfied, though we should likewise have the name of a good bookseller in London. Think on this and tell me your mind."<sup>81</sup>

Although Constable did not accept the work at this time, it was through his interest that it was sent to Ballantyne, by whom it was printed a quarter of a century later.<sup>82</sup> The other volume, *Memoirs of the Celts or Gauls*, Ritson made no effort to publish. He had it practically ready for the press but in the last of his extant letters referred to it as "laid by for the present."<sup>83</sup> These two histories were edited by Frank in 1827 and 1828. He professes to have altered the original manuscripts no whit, save to reduce Ritson's "peculiar orthography to the standard of our language" and to "omit a few hasty epithets, appearing to be harsher than the occasion could require or justify, (which the author, had he lived to publish the works himself, would, probably, have altered)"—a conjecture which the violence of Ritson's latest denunciations seems not to support.

This whole historical investigation was undertaken with the purpose of discrediting Pinkerton's theory of the origin of the Scots, and so these volumes will be looked into more minutely in the next chapter. It will suffice here to see their general nature.

In *Memoirs of the Celts* Ritson brought together all the allusions to the Celts which he was able to gather from poets and historians of the Middle Ages. These extracts he arranged in twenty-one chapters and ten appendices, treating of almost every detail of the customs, habits, and personal characteristics of the people, as well as of their origin and their language. In the *Annals of the Caledonians* it was his object to present

"a chronological account of the inhabitants of the country known, for the first time, by the name of Caledonia, and, in successive ages, by those of Albany, Pictland, Scotland, and North Britain, from the earliest period which history affords, and from the most ancient and authentic documents which time has preserved, and with that attention to truth and accuracy which integrity and utility require."

<sup>81</sup>*Constable and his Literary Correspondents*, I, p. 498.

<sup>82</sup>Constable wrote Scott, Sept. 20, 1825: "I am glad to say I have had it in my power to send Ballantyne two or three jobs within the last week—one of them the History of the Picts, by our old friend Ritson."

<sup>83</sup>*Letters*, II, p. 248.

His sources, as in the former work, were ancient historians and poets—especially the Latin chroniclers. His method is to follow a general historical introduction to each nation or people by all the passages concerning it which he was able to garner. It is distinctly to his credit that, though he held a brief for the Celts, and though he was concerned with establishing his theory in opposition to that supported by Pinkerton, yet he did not stoop to the methods of the professional dialectician by presenting only his own side of the case but fearlessly gave every reference found, irrespective of its bearing on his thesis. Such a method manifestly disarms criticism and inspires confidence.

The last of Ritson's publications appeared in 1831 as *Fairy Tales, now first collected: to which are prefixed two dissertations: 1. On Pygmies; 2. On Fairies*. There is no mention of this work anywhere in his extant correspondence, but it seems probable that the twenty-nine fairy tales, in both prose and verse, and the six fairy songs, which compose the body of the volume, were brought together in the 1780's when he was concerned with collecting and publishing the poetic *Garlands*. Yet from internal evidence it appears that the prefatory Essays could not have been composed earlier than 1794. He probably took up this volume and completed its preparation for the press sometime during his later years when illness made continued work on one subject a burden.

In the first edition of the *Reliques* Percy had printed with an old ballad of "Robin Good Fellow" two woodcuts which he said "seem to represent the dresses in which this whimsical character was formerly exhibited upon the stage." In *Scottish Songs* Ritson produced evidence purporting to prove that these cuts were originally used to represent two of the characters in Bulwer's *Artificial Changeling* and had nothing to do with Robin Good Fellow. Because Percy altered his remarks in the fourth edition of the *Reliques* but did not pay homage to Ritson for his correction, the critic finds occasion in the present Essay to ridicule the "contemptible tone of the pertinacious prelate." However little these contemptuous comments may illuminate the subject of Fairies, they serve to reveal the nature of their author, and to suggest very strongly a late date of composition.

Aside from this blemish and another produced by Ritson's ungracious reference in indecent language to his early controversy with Steevens on the mortality of Fairies, the Essay is delightful reading. It seems evident that Ritson sought to adapt his material to youthful readers, but he could not avoid learned and obscure quotations with their accompanying footnotes. By means of citations from writers of various countries and different ages, he demonstrated the universality of the belief in other-world creatures. He then turned to Oberon, Puck, Robin Good

Fellow, and Titania, whose dress, appearance, and habits are illustrated by happy extracts from Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, and lesser English poets. The Essay concludes with a touch of personal reminiscence which is extremely rare in Ritson's writings:

"The compiler of the present sheets remembers when very young, to have heard a respectable old woman, then a midwife, at Stockton, relate that, when, in her youthful days, she was a servant at Durham, being up late one Saturday night, cleaning the irons in the kitchen, she heard these *shrikes* (of the Barguest), first at a great, and then at a less distance, till, at length, the loudest, and most horrible, that can be conceived, just at the kitchen-window, sent her upstairs, she did not know how, where she fell into the arms of a fellow-servant, who could scarcely prevent her from fainting away."<sup>84</sup>

In concluding the chronology of Ritson's editorial labors it will be well to summarize his work and estimate its importance. In a period of twenty years—only thirteen of which were actively employed in publishing—he saw through the press thirty-six volumes and prepared nearly as many more for publication. Of these, ten were printed after his death; the others either were destroyed or remain unknown in manuscript. The printed volumes consist of collections of poems, songs, ballads, and romances; legal antiquities; critical comments; and historical extracts. The material of but few of these volumes is original. Ritson is their editor not their author; and it was as an editor that he exerted most influence upon his age. His editorial creed may be summed up in one word—honesty. To be more explicit, he insisted on recourse to the most ancient sources, on fidelity to originals in transcribing, on a candid notation of all necessary variations and additions, on a free acknowledgment of obligations, and on exact references to all quotations. These principles he followed in his own publications, and he insisted with a great deal of vehemence that other editors should adhere to them and unsparingly condemned those who went contrary to his precepts. Tyrwhitt had anticipated Ritson by nearly a decade in giving to England an example of scholarly editing; but, while his work attracted the favorable comments of nearly all critics, it did not operate as a reformative force. It remained for Ritson, with his eccentricities, his abusive manner, his violent language, and his reiterative insistence on honesty, to stimulate the attention of students of early literature to such a degree that editorial laxity was generally discountenanced. It was because of Ritson's activity that Percy purged the fourth edition of the *Reliques* of much dross and that Pinkerton confessed his dishonesty and plead for forgiveness. Ireland and Scott admittedly stood in awe of his critical

<sup>84</sup>*Fairy Tales*, p. 58.

eye, and Ellis and Weber confessed themselves indebted to him for examples of faithful editing.<sup>85</sup>

In the field of popular poetry Ritson's influence was likewise considerable. The mere bulk of his poetical material outweighs that of any other man of his day. Half the total number of his volumes were collections of poems, songs, ballads, and romances, both English and Scottish. Although he confessed his failure to gather ballads from oral tradition, yet he rescued from possible destruction many a relique of antiquity by making accessible unknown or forgotten manuscripts and black letter copies. Not only did he increase the interest in popular poetry first aroused by Percy, but he inspired a veneration for the "rude" remains of the past which was absent in the days of Percy and came to be thoroughly acknowledged only in those of Scott and Laing.

<sup>85</sup>This was a preliminary, though a necessary, step to present-day "critical" editing. For a concise statement of the evolution of editing from the exact reproduction of a single MS. through the "eclectic" method to the "critical", see E. P. Hammond, *Chaucer: A Bibliographical Manual*, New York, 1908, pp. 106-13.



## CHAPTER VII

### PREFATORY DISSERTATIONS

Classification of the material—General Characteristics of the Essays—First division: Songs and musical instruments—Historical view—Among the English—In Scotland—Second division: Minstrels, ballads, and romances—Percy's minstrel theory—Ritson's refutation—Definition of terms—Percy's alterations in fourth edition of *Reliques*—Social status of the minstrels—Their literary status—Ballad origins—Oral transmission—Comments on the folio manuscript—Exposure of Percy's editorial methods—Third division: Scottish poetry and history—Attack upon Pinkerton's integrity—Antipathy toward Scotchmen—Attack upon Scottish national character—Pinkerton's "Gothic system"—Ritson's defense of the Celts—Summary.

All of Ritson's publications have now been passed in review, and it remains to consider the historical essays prefixed to four of the collections. These are five in number: 1. "A Historical Essay on the Origin and Progress of National Song", in *English Songs*, 1783; 2. "Observations on the Ancient English Minstrels", and 3. "Dissertation on the Songs, Music, and Vocal and Instrumental Performances of the Ancient English", in *Ancient Songs*, 1790; 4. "A Historical Essay on Scottish Song", in *Scottish Songs*, 1794; and 5. "Dissertation on Romance and Minstrelsy", in *Metrical Romances*, 1802. To these will be added, for reasons presently apparent, two historical volumes: *Memoirs of the Celts*, 1827, and *Annals of the Caledonians*, 1828. Ritson made no formal classification of his material except within each of the essays, yet the substance of all of them falls naturally into three divisions: songs and the musical instruments that accompanied singing; minstrels, ballads, and romances; Scottish poetry and history. In handling the last type of material he came into violent opposition to Pinkerton and his assumptions, and much of his investigation was undertaken with the avowed purpose of controverting his Scottish opponent. A situation almost parallel to this obtains in the second division. What he had to say about minstrels and romances was largely inspired by the desire to expose the fallacy of Bishop Percy's hypotheses. Only in dealing with the history of song and musical instruments is he free from personal controversy with an individual and his theories.

Although the titles are various, these essays are all built upon one plan. Just as in forming his collections of poetry and song Ritson was the editor and not the poet, so in producing the essays he was the com-

piler and not the historian. In his own view, however, he was writing history, for he considered it the business of the historian simply to give his material as he found it without attempting to put himself into it, much less to construct a philosophy. It was in the strength of this belief that he refused in most instances to draw inferences from his material and failed always to summarize conclusions. What he did do was this. Given a subject, say English or Scottish song, he gathered from remote poetical and historical sources an astonishing number of references and allusions to it and then strung them together in chronological sequence with a minimum of editorial comment. It was his declared purpose "to discover fact, not to indulge conjecture", and it was matter of pride to him that he made no statement without citing for it an old authority, either printed or manuscript.

Such was the plan adopted in all the essays. It was worked out more exhaustively for songs than for any other subject. The "Historical Essay on the Origin and Progress of National Song" gave a survey of the subject from the very earliest times to Ritson's day. Ostensibly dealing with English song, it follows the development of the type through Greek, Roman, Italian, Spanish, and French. This employment of the comparative method was a little surprising in Ritson in view of his slightly earlier condemnation of Warton for using it in his *History*. But it is introduced awkwardly and not very effectively. What Ritson really does is to give the development of national song in each country separately. Except in the treatment of France he makes no effort to illustrate the progress of national song in England by its growth among other peoples. The essay is a learned compilation and was the product of unwearied research. The extensive quotations from Greek and Latin sources amply demonstrate Ritson's familiarity with the ancient tongues, unless, mayhap, he used translations and had the help of friends in this part of the work. It has been asserted by Haslewood<sup>1</sup> and denied by Nicolas<sup>2</sup> that he was materially assisted in the classical portion by his friend John Baynes. There seems no room for doubt on the question as he himself states<sup>3</sup> that he is indebted to Baynes for the translation of all original Greek poetry in the essay.

Ritson pursued the subject of English song still further and seven years later published the "Dissertation on the Songs, Music, and Vocal and Instrumental Performances of the Ancient English." That part

<sup>1</sup>Op. Cit., p. 9, note.

<sup>2</sup>Op. Cit., p. xxxiv, note.

<sup>3</sup>Ritson's MS. note to *Eng. Songs*, p. ix. All page references to the essays will be given under the titles of the books in which they appear, not under the subject of the essays.

of the Dissertation dealing with the songs is an excellent supplement to the earlier essay. He begins the subject with the Norman Conquest and gives it detailed treatment such as the length of his former essay and the attention paid to foreign tongues made impossible there. In treating of the music and the musical instruments he makes extensive use of the histories of Burney<sup>4</sup> and Hawkins<sup>5</sup> and supplements these with numerous illustrations from the literature of the period. Together these two essays present a great mass of material on the subject—undigested, but valuable merely in the fact of its being brought together.

With the essays on English Song must be noted briefly the "Historical Essay on Scottish Song", which does in the same way for the songs and music of the northern kingdom what the two previous essays do for England. It falls into three divisions treating respectively of the songs, the music, and the musical instruments. In this it exactly parallels the earlier dissertations and affords a further illustration of the duplication of Ritson's English interests in Scottish affairs.

With the exception of the "Dissertation on the Songs, Music, etc.", the essays thus far considered play a minor part in the two remaining divisions: that on Scottish Song in connection with Pinkerton and the whole Scottish question, that on English Song with the discussion of Percy and the minstrels.

The earliest formal treatise on the ancient English minstrels was Percy's "Essay", published in the original edition of the *Reliques*, 1765, and reprinted without material alteration in the second and third editions, 1767 and 1775. Percy defined the minstrels to be "an order of men in the Middle Ages, who united the arts of poetry and music, and sung verses to the harp of their own composing." By means of a wealth of quotations from English and continental sources he pictured the minstrels as a society of men in high repute, having free access to the homes of the nobility and the great and to the courts of kings. He represented them as musicians, as singers, and as poets; often as all three in one. The Anglo-Saxon minstrel he gave an exalted character, almost equal to that of the Scandinavian Skald; and for ages after the Conquest the English minstrels were, he declared, persons of honor and renown.

Percy's minstrel theory was first challenged by Ritson in his "Essay on National Song", wherein he flatly contradicted almost every claim to honor which the Bishop had made for the minstrels. Only a few

<sup>4</sup>Charles Burney, *A General History of Music, from the earliest ages to the present period*. London, 1776.

<sup>5</sup>Sir John Hawkins, *The General History of the Science and Practise of Music*. London, 1776.

historical references were adduced in this essay, but Ritson again took up the subject and treated it at some length in the "Observations on the Ancient English Minstrels". He there set himself to answer the question: "Whether at any time, since the Norman Conquest, there has existed a distinct order of Englishmen, who united the arts of poetry and music, and got their livelihood by singing to the harp verses in their native tongue of their own composing." He ignored the Anglo-Saxon period because he considered it impossible to obtain reliable data concerning it. His aversion to Geoffrey of Monmouth,<sup>6</sup> whom Percy had frequently cited in the early part of his essay, led him to declare that even the mere existence of minstrels in England prior to the eleventh century was wholly conjectural. Nevertheless, the allusions which Percy gathered from Tacitus, Bede, and the Saxon Chronicle, as well as from Geoffrey, create a strong impression in favor of his theory. Little has since been added to our stock of information concerning the Anglo-Saxon minstrel—perhaps nothing with historical authentication; and Percy's theory remains as a highly probable conjecture.<sup>7</sup>

In taking up the subject at the time of the Conquest, Ritson's first step was the very essential one of distinguishing the various terms which Percy had taken over from the French and indiscriminately massed together under the name minstrel. "Under this term", says the critic, "we are to include the *trouvère* or poet, the *chanteur* or vocal performer, and the *ménétrier* or musician: not to mention the *fablier*, *conteur*, *jongleur*, *baladin*, etc. all of which were sometimes distinct professions and sometimes united in one and the same man."<sup>8</sup> Although Guiraut de Riquier,<sup>9</sup> five centuries before Ritson, had protested against the confusion arising from the indiscriminate grouping of the various classes of entertainers, Percy persistently refused to differentiate them. He declared that "it equally throws light upon the general history of the profession to show what favor or encouragement was given, at any particular period of time, to any one branch of it."<sup>10</sup>

Acting on the distinction which he had made, Ritson first of all separated the English from the French and Norman minstrels. It was

<sup>6</sup>Expressed in uncompromising terms in the *Life of King Arthur*. See above, Chapter VI.

<sup>7</sup>The best treatment of the English Minstrels is that given by Chambers in the first four chapters of *The Medieval Stage*, Oxford, 1903. Other English books on the subject are unsatisfactory. An excellent bibliography of French and German works is given by Chambers.

<sup>8</sup>*Ancient Songs and Ballads*, 2nd edition, I, p. ii, note. See also *Metrical Romances*, 2nd edition, I, p. 79.

<sup>9</sup>See Chambers, *Op. Cit.*, I, p. 63.

<sup>10</sup>*Reliques*, 4th edition, I, p. 50.

the latter, he maintained, whom Percy had described as a respectable society with free entrance to the homes of the nobility. The English minstrels, he declared, were not a respectable society, if a society at all. They were only rude singers to the vulgar and illiterate and had no opportunity to appear at Court or in the houses of the nobility, because there only French was spoken and English despised.

From the absence of reference by historians or by the English minstrels to themselves as composers, Ritson concluded that they, unlike the French minstrels who constantly refer to themselves in their songs, did not compose but only sang and played. "They could sing and play; but it was none of their business to read and write."<sup>11</sup> Ritson's evidence is probable, not conclusive. In rebuttal Percy maintained, with much plausibility, that "by proving that minstrels were singers of the old romantic songs, gests, etc., we have in effect proved them to have been the makers of at least some of them."<sup>12</sup> But Ritson carried his restrictions a step further and limited the function of the minstrels to playing on musical instruments,—a conjecture that is open to grave doubt. From the mediæval glossarists, from the early chroniclers, from "Piers Plowman", and from the Mysteries, he extracted passages in which "minstrel" was used interchangeably with "fiddler". But the critic himself does not seem to be wholly assured on this point, for he elsewhere admits that the minstrels went up and down the country singing ballads and rude songs to the accompaniment of their musical instruments. He is, however, assured of the utter degradation of the English minstrels and of their rapid decline in the eyes of the law. The extinction of minstrelsy, if not of the minstrels, came in the age of Elizabeth as a result of religious restrictions and of legal enactments made necessary by the large number of men who continually sought refuge for vagabondage under the guise of minstrels. At a fitting postlude to his account of their services, Ritson quotes the following satire by Dr. Bull:

"When Jesus went to Jairus' house,  
Whose daughter was about to dye,  
He turn'd the minstrel out of doors,  
Among the rascal company:  
Beggars they are with one consent,  
And Rogues, by act of parliament."<sup>13</sup>

In the fourth edition of the *Reliques* Percy revised his essay to a considerable extent and profited by Ritson's criticisms. Although he

<sup>11</sup>*English Songs*, I, p. lxxviii.

<sup>12</sup>*Reliques*, I, p. 60.

<sup>13</sup>*Ancient Songs*, I, p. xvi, note.

nowhere mentions his opponent by name, he expressly states that "in consequence of objections respecting the English minstrels after the Conquest [the latter] part [of the essay] hath been much enlarged, and additional light thrown upon the subject: which, to prevent cavil, hath been extended to minstrelsy in all its branches, as it was established in England, whether by natives or foreigners."<sup>14</sup> Finding it impossible to distinguish between English and French minstrels (as Ritson had demanded) and still maintain his thesis throughout, Percy altered the title of the essay to read: "The ancient minstrels in England."<sup>15</sup> Declaring that he had "readily corrected any mistakes which have been proved to be in this Essay" because he was "wedded to no hypothesis", he also changed his definition of minstrels to comply with Ritson's criticism. It now read: "an order of men in the Middle Ages, who subsisted by the arts of poetry and music, and sang to the harp verses composed by themselves, or others." But, while the Bishop conceded a good deal to Ritson by admitting that the English minstrels were, perhaps, properly speaking, "subordinate members of the college", and by qualifying many of his remarks on their exalted station, yet he persisted in considering them poets as well as musicians and continued the uncritical method of employing semi-synonymous terms without discriminating among them. Ritson examined Percy's revised essay carefully and made reply to it in the "Dissertation on Romance and Minstrelsy". There he exulted with unseemly delight over the alterations which the Bishop had made as a result of his criticisms<sup>16</sup> and filled his pages with additional proofs of the points already advanced.

It is now apparent that the issue between Percy and Ritson was a dual one: what was the social status of the English minstrels—were they honored and respected, or were they rogues and vagabonds? What was their literary status—were they merely musicians and singers, or were they composers as well? Percy answered both questions by giving to the minstrels the most elevated rank in both literary and social spheres; Ritson, by giving them the lowest. The crux of the whole disagreement lay in the refusal of both men to recognize the coeval existence of two grades or classes of minstrels. The distinction once clearly made between the English and Normal minstrels, Ritson was correct in consid-

<sup>14</sup>*Reliques*, 4th ed., p. 64.

<sup>15</sup>This is significant because it shows that Percy conceded to Ritson practically half the point at issue.

<sup>16</sup>Wheatley ignores this last Essay and labors under the impression that the "Essay on the ancient English minstrels", 1790, was Ritson's reply to Percy's revisions in the 4th edition of the *Reliques*, 1794. See *Reliques*, ed. H. B. Wheatley, 1876, I, p. 430.

ering the former as an inferior society. There can be little, if any, doubt that the Anglo-Saxon types were submerged by the Norman minstrels and in the centuries immediately following the Conquest were in disrepute and that they had access to the homes of the nobility or the court only when in the company of French minstrels.<sup>17</sup> But if this distinction is not made—if the subject for discussion is the “Ancient minstrels in England” and not the “Ancient English minstrels”<sup>18</sup>—it is legitimate to consider a class of men of high rank and renown. The difficulty lay in not realizing that this twofold classification runs through the whole history of minstrelsy. The merging of the *mimus* and *scop* of Roman and Teutonic tradition was never quite complete, but a new distinction based largely on the old difference came to be well established in England by the second quarter of the fourteenth century.<sup>19</sup> Both Percy and Ritson were treating of the same period of time<sup>20</sup> but of different classes of men in it. As a result, each of the disputants had hold of only a bare half of the truth, yet each succeeded in illustrating his half with historical, legal, and poetical references such as would not, perhaps, otherwise have been brought together for years. It was not a barren logomachy in which they were engaged. Modern writers on the subject confess that there is little fact to be added to the stock accumulated by these pioneers, but that it only remains for them to place the two halves side by side and make the necessary adjustments in order to come at the whole truth.

On the second point—the literary status of the minstrels—there was scarcely less divergence of opinion. Percy considered them composers as well as singers. While it was generally recognized that the English minstrels translated and adapted many of the romances brought over by the French, he held that in some cases the tables were turned and the French made versions of native English minstrel songs. “Rich-

<sup>17</sup>A roll of payments made on the occasion of a Whitsuntide feast held in London in 1306 records many minstrels by name. The list is headed by five minstrels with the title “le roy”; next come a number said to be in the employ of this or that reverend or noble guest at the feast. These have French names. Lastly comes a large number of inferior minstrels, “les autre menestres de la commune”, and some of these seem to have been of English birth. Chambers, *Op. Cit.*, I, p. 47.

<sup>18</sup>The difference in the title of his Essay made by Percy in the first and fourth editions.

<sup>19</sup>Chambers, *Op. Cit.*, vol. I, Bk. I, “Minstrelsy”.

<sup>20</sup>DeQuincey, “Homer and the Homeridae”, in *Works*, ed. Masson, 1896, vol. VI, p. 23, says of the point at issue between Percy and Ritson: “The contradiction lay in the *time*: Percy and Ritson were speaking of different periods; the Bishop of the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries—the attorney of the sixteenth and seventeenth”. But this is a misconception of the facts.

ard Cour de Lion" and "Eger and Grime", from the use of native names he considered of genuine English growth, and this view is held by the editors of the folio manuscript.<sup>21</sup> Ritson, on the contrary, did not believe the minstrels sufficient to account for minstrelsy. Granting to them neither education nor culture, it was absurd to think of the minstrels as the authors of fabulous narratives several thousand lines in length. Though they could neither read nor write, yet they could sing what men of genius had composed or translated for them. Ritson does not state who he thinks these "men of genius" were, but he says there is nothing about the romances themselves to preclude the view that they were written by "a monk in his cell" or "a priest in his closet".<sup>22</sup> While denying Percy's thesis that the English minstrels composed romances, he did not contend that there were none of native English growth. "'Eglamour'<sup>23</sup>, 'Trimour'<sup>24</sup>, 'The squyre of lowe degre', and it may be one or two more, of which no French originals are known, may be fairly concluded to be of English invention; but," he says, "it is absolutely impossible that this can be the case with 'Guy', 'Bevis', or the rest, of which these originals are extant."<sup>25</sup> With scant justice Ritson doubted the probability that these famous romances, the French manuscripts of which are superior to the English and antedate them by one, two, or even three centuries, had been originally composed on English soil though in the French language. Indeed, he carried his iconoclasm so far as to deny the theories of the Arabian, Scandinavian, and Provençal origin of romance, without substituting any definite system in their stead. All of these he rejected because they were largely conjectural, there being not sufficient fact to support a theory. But his own proposal was equally conjectural. "After all", he said, "it seems highly probable that the origin of romance in every age or country is to be sought in the different systems of superstition which have from time to time prevailed, whether pagan or Christian."<sup>26</sup> While this theory contains a large element of truth, Ritson pushed it too far in denying historical basis to the romances. Their heroes are not historical characters, he declared: "they are mere creatures of the imagi-

<sup>21</sup>J. W. Hales and F. J. Furnivall, *Bishop Percy's Folio Manuscript*, London, 1867-8, Vol. I, p. 341 ff.

<sup>22</sup>*Metrical Romances*, I, p. 57.

<sup>23</sup>"There is a secret history attached to the source of this romance yet to be unravelled"—Halliwell, ed. "Sir Eglamour of Artois", for Camden Society, 1844.

<sup>24</sup>Nothing of the source of this romance is given by Hales and Furnivall, nor by Halliwell who edited it for the Percy Society, 1846.

<sup>25</sup>*Metrical Romances*, I, p. 51.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 19.



nation and only obtain an establishment in history because it was usually written upon the authority of romance."<sup>27</sup>

Ritson's disrespect for the English minstrels was thoroughgoing. Not only did he rate them as rogues and vagabonds, deny them the ability to read and write, and limit their activities to "twanging on the harp", but he characterized their songs as rude and barbarous. Sidney's "blind crowder with no rougher voice than rude style",<sup>28</sup> was the typical minstrel for Ritson, and his music was happily described by Puttenham: "your ordinary rimers use very much their measures in the odd, as nine and eleven, and the sharp accent upon the last syllable, which therefore makes him go ill-favoredly and like a minstrel's music."<sup>29</sup> With the coming into favor of the ballad singer in the age of Elizabeth, Ritson noticed a corresponding decrease in the entertainment furnished by the minstrels. These were undoubtedly contemporaneous events, but a causal connection would be more difficult to establish than Ritson seems to think. It is his opinion that the ballad singers with their simple melodies soon drew all attention from the wild and licentious meter of the minstrels and caused them in sheer self-defense to adopt ballad tunes. But he does not, as Gummere states, "think the feeble ballads of Deloney better than Chevy Chase."<sup>30</sup> What he does say is that the old Chevy Chase is inferior in simplicity, nature, pathos, and melody to such ballads as "Fair Rosamond", "John Dory", "Little Musgrave and Lady Barnard", "Children in the Wood", etc.<sup>31</sup> But he did not fall into the error of considering these ballads as ancient as the minstrel songs: "Those pieces which we now call old ballads, are comparatively modern, that is, of the latter end of the sixteenth century." And he adds: "Our most ancient popular ballads, if we may judge from the few specimens preserved, were singularly rude."<sup>32</sup> Both Ritson's taste and judgment were in advance of his age; and in the matter of ballads his taste seldom lagged behind his judgment.

Ritson was a genuine admirer of the old popular ballad. He it was who first clearly differentiated song and ballad and gave the prevailing definition of ballad as a lyrical narrative.<sup>33</sup> With the true instinct of the

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 50.

<sup>28</sup>*Defense of Poetry*, ed. Cook, 1890, p. 29.

<sup>29</sup>*The Art of English Poetry*, Ed. Arber, 1869, p. 85.

<sup>30</sup>*Old English Ballads*, 1894, p. xxvi.

<sup>31</sup>*Ancient Songs*, pp. xxxiii-iv.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, p. c.

<sup>33</sup>*English Songs*, I, p. i. Motherwell, in *Minstrelsy, ancient and modern*, 1827, Preface, p. i; and Gummere, in *Old English Ballads*, p. xxxvi, give Ritson credit for the first clear-cut definition of ballad.

ballad lover, he declared that the genuine pieces of this species were not to be sought "in the works of Hamilton, Thomson, Smollet, or even Ramsay; but in the productions of obscure and anonymous authors, of shepherds and milk maids, who actually felt the sensations they describe; of those, in short, who were destitute of all the advantages of science and education, and perhaps incapable of committing the pure inspiration of nature to writing."<sup>84</sup> On the subject of ballad authorship he says nothing further; but from this statement and his remarks on the origin of minstrelsy we can judge pretty closely what his attitude would have been. He would have espoused the theory of individual authorship, and scouted that of communal origin. The "composing folk" would have vanished into nothingness under his uncompromising demand for historical authentication.

On the preservation of ballads by oral tradition Ritson spoke more definitely. It was his belief that there yet remained in his own day many pieces of the true type current in the oral tradition of Scotland. He had made several unsuccessful attempts to take them down from recitation; but his own failure did not cause him to deny that other persons, perhaps possessing greater tact, had been more fortunate. But he professed himself to be an incompetent judge of the antiquity and genuineness of many of the pieces published as "from tradition". Where he had not an ancient manuscript as a guide, he was almost lost. In such a case he confessed that his judgment was necessarily based on one or both of the following tests: the irregular style, and the pathetic simplicity of the genuine ballad. If judiciously applied, these tests would not often lead one astray. Of one principle, however, Ritson was very certain, viz., that oral transmission alters and tends always to degrade the material. "Obsolete phrases", he says, "will be perpetually changing for those better understood, and what the memory loses the invention must supply. So that a performance of genius and merit, as the purest stream becomes polluted by the foulness of its channel, may in time be degraded to the vilest jargon. Tradition, in short, is a species of alchemy which converts gold into lead."<sup>85</sup> With keen critical insight he remarked that the effect of tradition was "degrading" only to the form, to the words, but not to the substance of the ballad—that remained unaltered.<sup>86</sup> While the "description and sentiment" remained the same,

<sup>84</sup>*Scottish Songs*, I, p. lxxix.

<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*, p. lxxxii.

<sup>86</sup>This conclusion, unassailable as it is, was in the present instance based on a false premise. To illustrate the transforming power of tradition, Ritson compared a popular version of "The Wee Wee Man" with a fourteenth century manuscript which he erroneously considered to be its original. Child prints the manu-

the "expressions and allusions" fluctuated with the times and communities through which they passed, so that no single piece was preserved in oral tradition exactly as it had been originally composed. The advocates of oral tradition in Percy's day, and especially the Ossianic enthusiasts, insisted that every piece current in the mouth of the folk was sung exactly as it had been composed. On this point Ritson remarked in conclusion:

"Had the 'Canterbury Tales' of Chaucer been preserved to the present time in the same manner, there would not have remained one single word which had fallen from the pen of that venerable bard: they would have been as completely, though not quite so elegantly modernized, as they are by Dryden and Pope: and yet it is pretended that the poems of Ossian have been preserved immaculate for more than a thousand years."<sup>87</sup>

Ritson displayed a sincere love for the reliques of antiquity and an ardor in collecting and preserving the rude remains of the past. He repeatedly urged the publication of ballads and minstrel songs and declared that one of his highest ambitions in making his own collections was to inspire others of a like nature.<sup>88</sup> He insisted, however, that these collections should be made scientifically and with absolute fidelity to originals, whether oral or written. But students of popular poetry in Ritson's day were not accustomed to apply a stern critical faculty or a cold judgment to ballads and romances. To these they preferred to apply the test of feeling or taste. Percy gave the first note-worthy example of this method in the *Reliques*; and here again Ritson joined issue with him. The critic's disgust with Percy's manner of handling his professedly ancient material led him quite early to question the very existence of the folio manuscript. On Ritson's conduct in this matter there has been much half-informed writing,<sup>89</sup> and it will not be impertinent to review his comments.

script in an appendix. He remarks that this poem stands in somewhat the same relation to the ballad of the "Wee Wee Man" as the poem of Thomas of Ercaldoune does to the ballad of Thomas Rymer, "but with the important difference that there is no reason for deriving the ballad from the poem in this instance." *Op. Cit.*, I, p. 329.

<sup>87</sup>*Scottish Songs*, I, p. lxxxii. Ritson was always outspoken against the Ossian imposture. See especially *Ibid.*, I, p. xxii and *English Songs*, I, p. xxxvi.

<sup>88</sup>See Prefaces to all the collections, especially *Ancient Songs*, I, p. ciii and *Scottish Songs*, I, p. cxix.

<sup>89</sup>See Surtees, *History of Durham*, III, p. 193 ff.; *Dibdin's Decameron*, III, p. 338 ff.; and Park's notes to *English Songs*. Pickford writes: "Ritson denied the existence of the manuscript: it is said in order to refute this charge, the fine portrait of Percy, painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds, had, in compliance with his own request, the disputed manuscript Folio placed in his hand, in order to show that

The first published evidence of Ritson's doubt as to the existence of the famous manuscript occurs in the *Observations on Warton, 1782* (p. 11): "You say you think you have somewhere seen a romance in verse, entitled, 'The Turks and Gawaine'. The Bishop of Dromore says he has it in his folio MS. Did you ever see THAT?" This ironical challenge, in itself, simply implies doubt of Warton's having seen the manuscript, not of its reality. The next statement expresses doubt, but not yet denial of its authenticity. He is commenting, in the *Remarks on Shakespeare, 1783* (p. 167), on the "unreasonable practise" of commentators in referring their readers to rare books which it is virtually impossible for them ever to see. Percy has here made reference to the poem of "John the Reeve", and Ritson remarks:

"never was this absurdity carried to such an extent of mockery as it is in the present instance; where the learned prelate very *cooly* orders us to *inspect* a poem, only extant, as he is well assured, and has elsewhere told us, in a certain Folio MS. in *his own possession*, which, *perhaps*, no one *ever saw*, and which (if it really exist) he will, for his own sake, take effectual care that no one else shall see."

In a second publication of the year 1783, Ritson remarked with great justice that "the genuineness of the pieces in the *Reliques* cannot be properly investigated or determined without an inspection of the original manuscript from which they are said to be extracted."<sup>40</sup> This was one of the earliest, if not the very first, of the demands upon Percy to publish his manuscript. But requests and threats and demands were to be equally unavailing for nearly a century.

Some time after these attacks Percy began to exercise himself to convince Ritson of his error. He asked J. C. Walker, a mutual friend, to undertake the task of persuading the critic of the existence of the manuscript. Walker wrote to Ritson and told Percy that in doing so, "I had little more to do than to transcribe your Lordship's letter changing as I proceeded, the second to the first person."<sup>41</sup> Walker was not far wrong in his conjecture that he had "opened Ritson's eyes". The critic replied immediately:

"As a publication of uncommon elegance and poetical merit I have always been, and still am, a warm admirer of Bishop Percy's *Reliques*, and although I it had an actual existence." Life of Percy in Hales and Furnivall edition of the Folio manuscript, I, p. xlvii. The portrait here referred to was painted in May, 1773 (see the general Introduction of Hales and Furnivall, p. liii), and Ritson's earliest comment on the manuscript appeared late in 1782.

<sup>40</sup>*English Songs*, I, p. lxxvi.

<sup>41</sup>Sept. 22, 1789, Nichols, *Lit. Illust.*, VII, p. 710. Percy took little public notice of Ritson, but he made numerous private efforts to turn aside the critic's shafts.

have been persuaded that he has not on every occasion been so scrupulously attentive to his originals as I think the work required, I shall be very glad to find the idea unfounded, and readily confess that what you have been so obliging as to tell me about the Folio MS. has in a great measure removed my prejudice on that head. The limits of a letter will not permit me to enter fully into the discussion of a question upon which I believe a good deal may be said. In the course of some prefatory matter to a book which ought to have come out two or three years ago, but which I hope to receive and have the pleasure of transmitting to you in a short time, you will perceive the grounds upon which I have ventured to doubt the authenticity or at least the fidelity of this celebrated publication."<sup>42</sup>

Walker at once communicated the substance of this letter to Percy with the comment: "Thus have I, without a breach of confidence, opened Mr. Ritson's mind to your Lordship."<sup>43</sup>

The publication to which Ritson referred in the letter just quoted was *Ancient Songs and Ballads*, 1790. In the Preface he acknowledged his error: "The existence of this MS., if ever questioned, is now placed beyond the possibility of a doubt. But", he significantly adds, "it appears to have suffered much by ill usage." He cites a dozen poems in which "the learned collector has preferred his ingenuity to his fidelity, without the least intimation to the reader." From the great number of such instances in the *Reliques* he concludes that "no confidence can be placed in any of the 'old minstrel ballads' inserted in that collection, and not to be found elsewhere."<sup>44</sup> With perfect candor he admitted that he had no objection to Percy's filling out the defective pieces with verses of his own; but with advanced ideals of editing he insisted that the new should have been clearly distinguished from the old. Percy defended many of his errors by his distant removal from the press at the time of printing, and Ritson, with his usual keenness, suggested that he "would perceive the justice of confining this excuse to the first edition."<sup>45</sup>

Percy's friends now became interested in his defense. Pinkerton outlined a statement of the authenticity of the manuscript, which was to

<sup>42</sup>Nov. 4, 1789, *Letters*, I, p. 152.

<sup>43</sup>Nov. 7, 1789, Nichols, *Lit. Illust.*, VII, p. 711. Later Percy accused Walker of lukewarmness and said his conduct reflected on his moral character. This was because Walker remained in the good graces of Ritson and was mentioned with praise in the Preface to *Scottish Songs*. Walker answered Percy that he had convinced Ritson of the existence of the manuscript but was unable to persuade him further until he could, by an inspection of the document, verify his own conviction that the Bishop had 'dropped no unacknowledged flowers' in the *Reliques*. Spring, 1794, *Ibid.*, VII, p. 725.

<sup>44</sup>*Ancient Songs*, I, p. xxix ff.

<sup>45</sup>Ritson to Walker, January 1, 1790, Nichols, *Lit. Illust.*, VII, p. 725.

be signed by a number of prominent literary men, and he suggested that the manuscript itself be deposited in a public place for inspection. To this Percy would not consent, exclaiming:

"This was the very end to which Mr. Ritson had been driving. . . . But he shall be disappointed: the manuscript shall never be exposed to his sight in my lifetime; and, as I have no other resource, I hope yet to procure some respectable family name, that may be generously interposed as a shield, before one whom the assailant knows to be incapable, from the peculiarities of his situation, of self-defense."<sup>46</sup>

The manuscript was accordingly deposited for nearly a year at the house of Nicol, the printer, while the fourth edition of the *Reliques* was passing through the press. It was inspected by Barrington, Cracherode, Farmer, Steevens, Malone, and Reed, whose names are appealed to in the Advertisement to that edition in support of the description of the manuscript there given.<sup>47</sup> Of these men, at least Steevens, and perhaps others, while convinced of the existence of the manuscript and of its correspondence with the printed copy in one or two particular ballads which he had examined carefully, could not be brought to subscribe to the veracity of the *Reliques* as a whole.<sup>48</sup> Ritson himself had long since given over the idea of denying the existence of the manuscript; but Percy and his friends continued to remark on this point with the apparent object of drawing attention from the critic's more pertinent and less easily answered objections to the way in which it had been handled.

In the "Dissertation on Romance and Minstrelsy" occurs Ritson's final judgment on the *Reliques*. It may be repeated that he nowhere disputes the existence of the manuscript "in its present mutilated and miserable condition"; but he still insists that Percy has "fairly and honestly printed scarcely one single poem, song, or ballad" from it. In justification of this judgment, antithetical as it was to the prevailing

<sup>46</sup>July 28, 1792. See the *Literary Correspondence of John Pinkerton*, 2 vols., London, 1830. Contrast with the sentiment of the above letter the assertion that prior to Ritson's attack Percy had intended to bequeath his Folio Manuscript to him, "thinking as he himself owned, it could not be in better hands." *Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. XCV, i, p. 486-8. The authenticity of this statement is highly conjectural.

<sup>47</sup>Park is in error in stating, *English Songs*, I, p. lxxvi, note, that Ritson had it in his power to inspect the manuscript at this time. See Percy's declaration of hostility, above.

<sup>48</sup>See Nares to Percy, Dec. 28, 1804, Nichols, *Lit. Illus.*; VII, pp. 606-7; and *British Critic*, Jan., 1805.

opinion, he summarized, in equally revolutionary terms, his conception of an editor's function.

"To correct the obvious errors of an illiterate transcriber, to supply irremediable defects, and to make sense of nonsense, are certainly essential duties of an editor of ancient poetry, provided he act with integrity and publicity; but secretly to suppress the original text, and insert his own fabrications for the sake of providing more refined entertainment for readers of taste and genius, is no proof of either judgment, candor, or integrity."<sup>49</sup>

Then he printed "The Marriage of Sir Gawaine", placing the "amended" copy from the first edition of the *Reliques* by the side of the "original" as given in the fourth, designating by different type Percy's additions. The contrast brought out by this method was only intensified, and Ritson's generalization as to the faulty character of the whole work was verified, by the Hales and Furnivall edition of the Folio manuscript sixty-five years later. "The purchasers and perusers of such a collection are deceived and imposed upon", Ritson declared; "the pleasure they receive is derived from the idea of antiquity, which, in fact, is perfect illusion."

Percy's defense of his method was that "the rudeness of the more obsolete poems", and "the tediousness of the longer narratives", must be atoned for by "little elegant pieces of the lyric kind", in order for them to appeal to "a polished age like the present."<sup>50</sup> And modern critics and historians of literature, following his lead, declare with one accord that the plan pursued was the only one which would have insured a kindly reception to these rude remains of antiquity. But Ritson counselled thus:

"If the ingenious editor had published all his imperfect poems by correcting the blunders of puerility or inattention, and supplying the defects of barbarian ignorance, with proper distinction of type, it would not only have gratified the austerest antiquary, but also provided refined entertainment for every reader of taste and genius."<sup>51</sup>

This simple device seems not to have suggested itself to any one of the critics of the last century. They are accustomed to consider the revival of interest in popular poetry, along with other romantic manifestations, as largely an emotional growth which would have been killed, or indefinitely retarded, by the introduction of the purely intellectual and critical. But it is at least an open question whether the mere distinction of type suggested by Ritson would not have left the immediate effects of the

<sup>49</sup>*Metrical Romances*, I, p. 70.

<sup>50</sup>Preface to *Reliques*.

<sup>51</sup>*Metrical Romances*, I, p. 70.

*Reliques* substantially the same; and there can be no doubt that many a genuine ancient piece would have been preserved and that the famous and valuable Folio manuscript would have been given to the world of scholarship in its primitive state a century earlier than it was.<sup>52</sup>

The third group of topics in the prefatory dissertations is Scottish poetry and history. Ritson's point of departure here was quite similar to that in the second division, with the emphasis now upon Pinkerton and Scotland rather than upon Percy and England. Again it was the detection of forgery and literary deception which led him into a thorough investigation of a relatively unexplored field. On the publication of Pinkerton's *Select Scottish Ballads*, 1783,<sup>53</sup> which professed to be "now first published from tradition in their original perfection", Ritson demonstrated in a letter to the *Gentleman's Magazine*,<sup>54</sup> that "The laird of Woodhouslie", "Lord Livingston", "Binnorie", "The death of Men teith", "I wish I were where Helen lies", the second part of "Hardy-knute", and two pretended fragments, were "artful and impudent forgeries". Although Pinkerton was allowed, through the singular conduct of the editor of the *Gentleman's*, to print a denial of Ritson's charges before the letter was published, and although he took counsel of friends<sup>55</sup> as to how he should dispose of his calumniator, yet in *Ancient Scottish Poems*, 1786, he confessed the deception and pleaded for forgiveness, urging in extenuation of his guilt, youth and a laudable desire to please the public.<sup>56</sup> But with this expression of penitence did not go an

<sup>52</sup>It may be asserted that a comparison of the popular reception of the *Reliques* and any one of Ritson's collections would be a sufficient test of this argument. It cannot be denied that Percy's interpolations and additions contributed greatly to the popularity of his work. The question is, would it have been less popular with the new distinguished from the old in some simple and unobtrusive manner? Ritson's collections could never have been such general favorites as the *Reliques* because he lacked the Bishop's poetic gift. Had either of them possessed the excellencies of both, the scholar and the general reader would have been equally served.

<sup>53</sup>Originally, *Scottish Tragic Ballads*, London, 1781.

<sup>54</sup>Letter signed "Anti-Scot", *Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. LIV, ii, pp. 312-14.

<sup>55</sup>Walpole advised Pinkerton to make a firm denial of the charges but by no means to display anger. *Pinkerton's Correspondence*, I, p. 87.

<sup>56</sup>Ritson afterward gave it as his opinion that "had this letter never appeared these contemptible forgeries would have continued to disgrace the annals of Scottish poetry, till, at least, the pretence of antiquity had proved too slight a buoy to support the weight of their intrinsic dullness." *Scottish Songs*, I, p. lxxvi, note. This was not the only error of which Pinkerton was convinced by Ritson. Sept. 4, 1794, he wrote to Percy: "I must confess myself thoroughly convinced that Minstrel only implied musician, and was never used for a bard, maker, or poet; were I reprinting any former production in this way I would retract all my opinions to



altered conduct which should accompany a true change of heart. He continued to insert his own productions in "ancient" collections, meanwhile making a display of honesty by censuring, with poor grace indeed, other men who had practised deception.<sup>57</sup>

Pinkerton again became involved with Ritson in 1792, when, in his *Scottish Poems*, he printed an imperfect version of "Sir Gavan and Sir Galeron of Galloway". This was from a manuscript of John Baynes, which fell to Ritson in 1787. Pinkerton requested permission to publish it, but Ritson refused on the ground that he intended to edit it himself. In spite of his promise that it should not be used, Pinkerton printed the romance and was scathingly rebuked for his perfidy in a communication to the *Gentleman's Magazine*, written by Ritson.<sup>58</sup> Pinkerton achieved his revenge for this letter in a violently denunciatory review of Ritson's *Scottish Songs*, in 1795.<sup>59</sup> This brought no public response from Ritson, though he remarked to friends on its "falsehood, impudence, and scurrility."<sup>60</sup> He said of Pinkerton, as Dr. Johnson of Goldsmith, "he only stumbles on truth by accident"; and he considered it "a thousand pities that John Pinkerton had not flourished in the age, and enjoyed the friendship of Geoffrey of Monmouth that he might have certified, with his sacred signature, the integrity and truth of the original manuscript of that veracious historian, as he did the no less genuine 'Shakspeariana', of William Ireland."<sup>61</sup>

Ritson's attack was undoubtedly intensified by Pinkerton's nationality. To Scotchmen he entertained an aversion as pronounced as that of Dr. Johnson. He lost no opportunity to satirize the Scotch, although he spent much labor and money in illustrating the antiquities of the the contrary, though often repeated." After suggesting a rearrangement of Percy's Essay to distinguish the Minstrel proper from the poets and reciters, he adds: "Even granting all the passages cited in your favor, you must contend against hundreds on the opposite side. For a part, Ritson's book may be referred to." *Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. CII, ii, p. 125.

<sup>57</sup>See his inconsistent censure of Ramsay in Preface to *Select Scottish Ballads*; and his abuse of those who believed in the authenticity of "Ossian", in his *Inquiry into the History of Scotland preceding the reign of Malcolm III or the year 1056*, 2 vols., London, 1790.

<sup>58</sup>See *Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. LXIII, p. 33. Ritson complained to Harrison, February 14, 1793, that "the scoundrel of an editor had the impertinence to omit the best part of my letter." *Letters*, II, p. 10. A note in Douce's hand on the original manuscript, now Douce 324, Bodleian, supports Ritson's contention that Pinkerton printed the romance "in direct violation of his promise."

<sup>59</sup>*Critical Review*, January, 1795. Reprinted in *The Letters of Joseph Ritson Esq. to Mr. George Paton*, Edinburgh, 1829.

<sup>60</sup>*Letters*, II, pp. 67, 75.

<sup>61</sup>*The Life of King Arthur*, p. xviii, note.

North. His letters abound in sarcastic flings at the Scottish people, and he passed no occasion to sneer at them.<sup>62</sup> His most vigorous pronouncement on the weakness of the Scottish character appeared in the "Essay on Scotch Song". There he sarcastically proposes as a subject of investigation for the new Royal Society, "Why the Scotch literati should be more particularly addicted to literary imposition than those of any other country." That they are, Ritson does not doubt. He agrees with Johnson that "a Scotchman must be a very sturdy moralist who does not love Scotland more than truth." Of the love of falsehood rather than of truth, he considers the many literary impostures perpetrated by Scotchmen an incontrovertible evidence.

"The forgeries of Hector Boethius, David Chalmers, George Buchanan, Thomas Dempster, Sir John Bruce, William Lauder, Archibald Bower, James Macpherson, and John Pinkerton, stamp a disgrace upon the national character, which ages of exceptionless integrity will be required to remove: an era, however, which, if one may judge from the detestation in which the most infamous and despicable of these imposters is universally held, has already commenced."<sup>63</sup>

This characterization of Scotland as the breeding place of literary forgeries and of himself as the most notorious of the malefactors, Pinkerton undertook to refute in the review already noted of *Scotish Songs*. His argument is beside the point, for his sole defense is that other nations have been equally guilty. That the impostures listed by Ritson were a national disgrace, he could not gainsay.

In calling attention to the prevalence of literary deception in Scotland, and in condemning Pinkerton for his falsehoods, Ritson was only pushing forward his campaign for truth and candor in all editorial dealings. And because it was done with his customary violence and lack of restraint, his manner has attracted attention while his beneficial service has been ignored. But he was something more than a mere caviller. His strictures on faulty editorial methods were not without their effect and were of value in proportion as they cleared the way for critical and scholarly methods. A more immediately recognized service, because a more definitely constructive work, was rendered in his opposition to Pinkerton's "Gothic System" of Scottish history.

<sup>62</sup>Cf. "I dread a Scotchman bringing ancient verses"; "shoals of Scotchmen are arriving in London every day; the difficulty I should imagine would be to find one going back"; "either accuracy or integrity is pretty extraordinary in a Scotchman"; etc., etc. *Letters, passim*.

<sup>63</sup>*Scotish Songs*, I, p. lxiii. Ritson's personal contempt for Pinkerton may have misled his judgment in this last clause. Chalmers wrote to Constable, Oct. 27, 1803: "there seems to be a Pinkerton mania in Scotland." *Constable and his Literary Correspondents*, I, p. 411.

Although the Scottish people had long considered themselves a very ancient nation, a true investigation of the original sources of their history was slow in making its appearance. In 1526 Hector Boethius, the Geoffrey of Scottish history, by embellishing the *Chronicles of Fordun*<sup>64</sup> and Andrew of Wyntoun<sup>65</sup> and adding a list of fabulous kings, manufactured an historical development highly gratifying to the Scots of his and succeeding generations. Boethius was followed by Bishop Lesley,<sup>66</sup> and George Buchanan,<sup>67</sup> both of whom continued the list of imaginary kings. The antiquity of the Scots, and especially the veracity of this kingly chronology, was attacked by Roderic O'Flaherty<sup>68</sup> in 1685, but the first considerable attempt to sift fact from tradition was that undertaken in 1729 by the antiquary, Father Thomas Innes.<sup>69</sup> The service which he rendered was largely negative. He destroyed about half of the Scottish kings and winnowed out from the accepted history much of the trash of tradition. A further step in this direction was taken half a century later by Sir David Dalrymple,<sup>70</sup> but the works of both these men were concerned only with the middle ages of Scottish history. This left the very ancient times, the real source of all the misunderstanding of later ages, untouched so far as critical treatment was concerned.

The first to undertake an elucidation of this ancient period was Pinkerton. His *Dissertation on the origin and progress of the Scythians or Goths, being an Introduction to the ancient and modern history of Europe*, 1787, presents in somewhat general form the theory of the origin of the Scottish people which was developed more fully in his *Inquiry into the history of Scotland preceding the reign of Malcolm III., or 1056, including the authentic history of that period*, 1790. Pinkerton brought to his task a wide but not a thorough knowledge of medieval history and an undisguised contempt of other laborers in the field. He recognized the necessity of grounding his history on authentic records, although not many of them were accessible to him and he did not always use honestly those available. With characteristic egotism he declared of his *Inquiry*, some time before its publication: "It is a

<sup>64</sup>John of Fordun, *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, 1384.

<sup>65</sup>*Original cronykil of Scotland*, 1406.

<sup>66</sup>*Historia Scotorum*, 1582.

<sup>67</sup>*History of the Picts*, 1578.

<sup>68</sup>*Ogygia seu rerum Hibernicarum chronologia*, London, 1685.

<sup>69</sup>As an appendix to his *Critical Essay on the ancient inhabitants of Scotland*, 2 vols., London, 1729, he published some ancient chronicles and fragments of Scottish history.

<sup>70</sup>*Annals of Scotland, from the accession of Malcolm III, surnamed Canmore, to the accession of Robert I.*; and *Annals of Scotland from the accession of Robert I., surnamed the Bruce, to the accession of the house of Stuart*, Edinburgh, 1776.

work which will fix the ancient history of my country upon the firm basis of ancient authorities, that nothing can shake. Men of science and all lovers of truth I shall convince: as for the rest, 'si vulgus vult decipi, decipiatur'.<sup>71</sup> His work is ingenious, but its value was greatly impaired by an unreasoning aversion to the Celts and everything Celtic, and by the adoption of an erroneous theory concerning the "Pix", as he persistently calls them.

Pinkerton classified the ancient peoples of Scottish history under four divisions: the Celts, Britons, Picts, and Scots. According to his theory the Goths, originally Scythians, in the centuries before the Christian era came westward from the wilds of their native country and over-ran all northern Europe, subduing the original inhabitants and colonizing the territory. About the Christian era the Peuki tribe of the all-conquering Goths went from Scandinavia to northern England, where they conquered and all but annihilated the inferior Celts. The Celts were to the other inhabitants of Europe what the savages of America were to the European settlers there; and they remain to this day "a dishonored, timid, filthy, ignorant, and degraded race." The Goths settled in the Lowlands of Scotland and were known to the Romans as Picts. They were subjugated by Agricola but later established a kingdom which spread over all Scotland. They were never conquered but were united with the Scots, a Celtic tribe from Ireland, when Kenneth by marriage succeeded to the Pictish throne in 503. After that time the Scots became insignificant, only giving their name to the kingdom. From 503 to the present day the Picts have continued supreme in the Lowlands. The Scottish vernacular of that section had its origin in the Teutonic dialect spoken by the Picts, or early invading Goths.

Pinkerton's theory did not go long unchallenged. Ritson attacked the earlier statement of it in a cursory fashion in the "Essay on Scottish Songs". There he only denied the general hypothesis without going into detail and charitably ascribed to insanity Pinkerton's treatment of the Celts as a "medial race between beasts and men". But he did not wish to let the matter rest in this incomplete state. Upon the publication of Pinkerton's *Inquiry* he was still more strongly convinced that "a history of the Celts by a person of learning and industry is much wanted." Knowing that John Lanne Buchanan had undertaken a reply to Pinkerton, Ritson awaited the appearance of the *Defense of the Scots Highlanders in general and some learned characters in particular*, 1794. But when this work proved to be what he had anticipated,<sup>72</sup> unscholarly and inadequate, he took up the subject of Scottish history

<sup>71</sup>Pinkerton to Percy, Nov. 19, 1785, in *Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. CII, ii, pp. 121-2.

<sup>72</sup>In anticipation of the publication of this book Ritson wrote to Paton, March

himself. From 1795 until his death he spent much time in this field, but the results of his labor were not published during his lifetime. In *Caledonia*, 1807, George Chalmers<sup>73</sup> summarized the various systems of Scottish history up to his own day. He expressed his opposition to Pinkerton's theory but did not enter into a scientific examination of the evidence. It remained for Ritson to vindicate the Celts and to expose the fallacy of the Pictish origin of the modern Scottish dialect, in his *Memoirs of the Celts* and *Annals of the Caledonians*. He had access to a wider range of ancient material than Pinkerton; his treatment of it was scientific; and his results were correspondingly more accurate. Although he could not have anticipated the rapid advance which has since been made in ethnological and linguistic science, yet he presented a large body of the authentic material upon which modern theories are based. The advance which he made over Pinkerton and the degree of his approach to present-day theories will be revealed by a brief examination of the *Memoirs* and *Annals*.

Speaking very strictly, it is inaccurate to say that Ritson had no definite historical policy in these volumes. He followed his usual method of amassing and arranging in chronological order all the historical references and poetical allusions which he could gather. But he avowedly held a brief for the Celts, and even though his candor led him to insert every pertinent reference to the subject whether it favored the Celts or not, yet his footnotes and casual comments leave no doubt as to his own beliefs. With an astonishing array of evidence from scores of early writers he traces the movements of the Celts on the continent. Instead of being an inferior and degraded race they were for several centuries before Christ the most powerful and numerous people in Europe. Eventually conquered by the Romans, they became disintegrated and were gradually absorbed by the other nations. "People of a Celtic race are yet to be found in Wales, Ireland, the north of Scotland, the Hebrides,

5, 1794: "Pinkerton's treatment of the 'Celtic savages' is to be speedily resented in print by the Rev. John Lane Buchanan . . . who seems in fact, to be as very a Celt as his antagonist could possibly wish for. I am sorry to find so good a cause in the hands of such an incompetent advocate." *Letters*, II, p. 46.

<sup>73</sup>Chalmers was by some thought to be the author of a review of Pinkerton's *Inquiry* which appeared in the first number of the *Edinburgh Review*. Apropos of this he wrote to Constable, Oct. 27, 1803: "I was surprised to learn from you that I should have been considered by anybody at Edinburgh to be the author of the *Vindication of the Celts*, which is so unlike anything that I ever wrote. If I had written on that subject, I would have beaten Pinkerton's brains out in one half the space. Pinkerton's *Goths* is a tissue of interpolation and falsehood, fiction, and impertinence; but I have never published anything upon the matter." *Constable and his Literary Correspondents*, I, p. 411.

the Isle of Man, Armorica, and in a district of the Alps, called the Pais de Vaud."<sup>74</sup> The primitive language of the Celts, dialects of which were still spoken by the people in these districts, Ritson said was not Teutonic, although it bore evidences of relationship with Germanic. This was about all that could be said on the subject before the introduction of comparative philology. Modern ethnology has confirmed Ritson's thesis on the predominance of the early Celts and has even denominated the time from the fifth to the third century before Christ, the "Celtic period".<sup>75</sup>

The *Annals of the Caledonians, Picts, and Scots; and of Strathclyde, Cumberland, Galloway, and Murray* is an attempt to give a chronological account of the early inhabitants of Caledonia from the most ancient and authentic documents. The main object of Ritson's labors here was to disprove Pinkerton's theory concerning the Teutonic origin of the Picts and the consequent influence of the Pictish tongue on the modern lowland Scottish, and at the same time he had opportunity to present further evidence of the importance of the Celts. From the testimony of Herodotus, Caesar, Tacitus, Bede, and others it appears that the most ancient inhabitants of the British Isles were the Celts,<sup>76</sup> who had no doubt settled there in the great Celtic period. The first mention of the Picts is about 300, when they are referred to by Caesar, Tacitus, and others, as enemies to the Britons.<sup>77</sup> Coming as they did from the continent to Ireland and thence to Caledonia, Ritson concluded that they were originally Celts but by long separation from that branch of the race which had settled in Britain had become a distinct nation and made war on their own kinsmen.<sup>78</sup> In 449 the South Britons called in the Saxons to aid them against the Picts and Scots, who were driven into the north. The Scots, originally Irish, and admitted by Pinkerton to be Celts, contended with the Picts against the South Britons. When these two nations were forced back by the combined efforts of the Saxons and Britons they fell to warring among themselves, with the result that the Picts were overcome and all but annihilated. This in itself was fatal to Pinkerton's Celto-Gothic system. By a wilful perversion of history he declared that it was the Scots who were exterminated. But the Scots gave their name to the country and to the language and from 503 are mentioned by historians with increasing frequency, while the

<sup>74</sup>*Memoirs of the Celts*, Preface, p. x.

<sup>75</sup>See Deniker, *The Races of Man*, 2nd edition, London, 1900, p. 317 ff. for a statement of modern views concerning the peoples of Europe, especially the Celts.

<sup>76</sup>*Annals of the Caledonians*, I, p. 13.

<sup>77</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 71 ff.

<sup>78</sup>Similar instances are not infrequent in the history of the races of men. See Deniker, *Op. Cit.*, p. 323 ff.

Picts are all but forgotten and their dialect and racial characteristics are preserved only in the northern islands and the remote highlands. How the Scots, admittedly an inferior race, should be able permanently to impose upon a people superior in every way, their language, customs, and institution must ever remain a mystery to those who support Pinkerton's theory of the Gothic origin of the Picts.

Perhaps the most important phase of this whole discussion was that concerning the Pictish influence on the modern Scottish dialect of the Lowlands. Pinkerton argued that the Picts were Goths and hence spoke a Teutonic dialect. He supported his theory by evidence from history. Tacitus said the Caledonians had a Germanic origin. The ancient Caledonians were Picts; therefore the Picts spoke a Germanic dialect. The Picts were known to have inhabited the Lowlands, and there a Teutonic dialect is now spoken while there is no evidence of any other having been prevalent. Therefore, he argued, the modern Scottish dialect of the Lowlands had its origin in the language spoken by the Picts.

Pinkerton's theory was questioned from the beginning, but it gained rather wide popular credence and did not want the support of students of poetry and language. The wide-spread interest in the Ossianic and other Erse poetry, and in all northern antiquities, was undoubtedly fostered by the misconception that the Gaelic people were Teutons and their language a dialect of Germanic.<sup>79</sup> James Sibbald, who published a *Chronicle of Scottish poetry from the thirteenth century to the Union of the Crowns*, 1802, lent his support to the general theory outlined by Pinkerton. John Jamieson, after an extended review of the evidence, in the introductory dissertation to his *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language*, 1808, declared himself convinced that the dialect of the Lowland Scots was not a daughter to English Saxon but was a sister language derived from the Teutonic speech of the Picts. Such a theory as this was possible only before the science of comparative philology had differentiated the various branches of the Indo-European family and shown something of their inter-relations. It is to be noted, however, that Ritson anticipated the conclusions of modern science in his treatment of the Picts. These people, he said,

<sup>79</sup>The great vogue of the Ossianic poems in Germany must have been due in part at least to this feeling of racial kinship. See Joseph Texte, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et les origines du cosmopolitisme littéraire*, Paris, 1895, p. 388 ff. Some hint of the importance of the national spirit in the Romantic movement is given by Farley, *Scandinavian Influences in the English Romantic movement*, 1903. The part played by ethnological and linguistic theories in the literary movements of the late eighteenth century is an interesting problem, but it has never been adequately considered.

were not Teutons but Celts. Their language was therefore a Gaelic dialect and could have had little if any influence on modern Scottish. The Gaelic, or Erse, was not wholly unintelligible to English speaking persons of his day because it was ultimately derived from the same root as the Saxon and would have many characteristics in common with it. Yet it was a mistake, he maintained, to attempt to apply this parallel to Scottish and Saxon. The dialect of the Lowlands was identical with the Saxon spoken north of the Humber and it was folly to separate them.<sup>80</sup> To Ritson's astonishing array of historical evidence little of incontrovertible authenticity has since been added. The study of philology has resulted in the common acceptance of certain general principles governing inter-relations of languages. By these Ritson's theory concerning the Scottish and Pictish dialects is supported.<sup>81</sup>

Ritson's whole treatment of the Scottish question was controversial in nature. It was something more, to be sure, but it had its inception in controversy. With all its learning and wide reading, the "Essay on Scotch Song" was an unblushing attempt to contradict Pinkerton. Ritson's various manuscript collections of Scottish songs and ballads were made with the object of teaching Pinkerton how his work should be done. And the two historical compilations were undertaken with no other purpose than to correct the theories of Pinkerton. A similar thread of personal controversy runs through all the discussions of romances and minstrelsy. It is unfortunate for Ritson's fame and for the permanent value of his work that he was so persistently the antagonist. To his contemporaries the constant ill-nature of his comments overshadowed everything else, and since his death he has been uniformly criticised for this weakness and only sporadically commended for his services to scholarship. He did much, however, that deserves praise. Disregarding his reprehensible manner, the ends he attained were worth striving for. He caused both Percy and Pinkerton to alter their methods and undoubtedly inspired many other editors to a more faithful and more scholarly treatment of their originals. Besides this impulse to correctness, he furnished students of old poetry, of ballads and romances, and of Scottish history with a fund of material from first sources such as had not previously been assembled.

<sup>80</sup>See *Annals*, especially I, p. 25 ff; p. 135 ff; and II, p. 25 ff.

<sup>81</sup>W. F. Skene applies to Pinkerton's hypothesis the reasoning of Ritson, judged in the light of later scientific developments, but makes no mention of the critic. *Celtic Scotland*, 2nd edition, 3 vols., Edinburgh, 1886, I, p. 196 ff. James Ferguson has produced topographical and linguistic evidence to prove that the Celtic element in the native population of the modern Scotch Lowlands is much larger than is generally believed. See "The Celtic Element in Lowland Scotland", *Celtic Review*, Vol. I, pp. 246-60; 321-32.



## CHAPTER VIII

### REVOLUTIONARY TRAITS DEATH

Visit to Paris—Interest in libraries—Enthusiastic over Revolution—Announces strong republican sympathy—Adopts republican forms in letters—Professes to be disciple of Paine and Rousseau—Fears for personal safety during prosecution of Revolutionary leaders—Becomes disgusted with them—Holcroft and Godwin—Finally gives up hope of English republic—Religious views—Discounts historical importance of Christianity—Has no respect for church or churchmen—Sneers at religious sects—An atheist—No belief in future existence—Follows high ethical standard—Spelling vagaries—Waning interest stimulated by visit to Paris—Nature of suggested improvements—His weakness—An orthographic mutineer—Vegetarianism—Converts nephew and sister—*Abstinence from Animal Food as a Moral Duty*—Contents—Contemporary comments—Illness increased by diet—Pecuniary distress—Endeavors to insure life—Apoplectic strokes—Violent insanity—Death—Burial—Disposition of library.

To the casual observer the outstanding eccentricities of Ritson's conduct and belief seem to have taken their rise chiefly in the revolutionary ardor which resulted from his visit to Paris in 1791. But they were fairly constant factors in his life, and he was only emboldened to espouse them more vigorously after his foreign journey. In the early days of 1788 Ritson was considering a trip to Paris or Madrid, "being ashamed", as he said, "to have lived so long in the world and seen so little of it."<sup>1</sup> Events in France, culminating in the States-General and the storming of the Bastille, combined with his own busy-ness to deter him for more than three years from translating his thoughts into action. The temporary lull which succeeded the first violent outbursts of popular feeling in France seemed, to the most optimistic, to indicate that the Revolution was ended. On June 9, 1791, Ritson wrote to Harrison:

"My desire to reside for a few weeks at or near Paris has been increasing ever since the Revolution, and is in reality very strong; which you will readily conceive when I give it as a decided opinion that no people ancient or modern was ever so deserving of admiration."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Letters*, I, p. 132.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 193.

Shortly after August 20 of that year<sup>3</sup> he set off for Paris in company with his friend William Shield. From Paris Shield proceeded, with a number of agreeable foreigners,<sup>4</sup> by easy stages to Rome and did not return to England till 1792. Ritson remained in Paris for a couple of months.<sup>5</sup> From his great interest in literary and historical antiquities one would expect him to avail himself of this opportunity to visit the splendid libraries and museums of Paris. He did improve this opportunity in a way, for immediately upon his return to London he wrote to Harrison:

"Paris abounds with antiquities, and public monuments, which you would be delighted to see. There are three magnificent libraries; two of which at least, are infinitely beyond either Bodley's or the Museum, both for printed books and manuscripts. When united as they probably will be in a little time, they will form the first collection in the world. All three are open to everyone who chooses to go, without previous applications or any exceptions. The French read a great deal, and even the common people (such, i mean, as cannot be expected from their poverty, to have had a favorable education, for there is now no other distinction of rank,) are better acquainted with their ancient history than the English nobility are with ours. They talk familiarly of *Charlechauve*, and at St. Dennis i observed that all the company, mostly peasants or mechanics, recognized with pleasure the portrait of *La Pucelle*."<sup>6</sup>

It does not appear, however, that he spent a great deal of time laboring in these institutions, for in his subsequent publications he made but one specific reference to the material which came in his way there.<sup>7</sup> This was evidently not a business trip. He seems to have made the visit for amusement only, and that he found in an absorbing interest in political events.

Ritson arrived in Paris at a peculiarly happy moment. The ill-advised flight of the King had been abruptly terminated by his enforced return to Paris in July. After the mutterings of discontent with the monarch's conduct had died away, attention centered mainly on the new Constitution. In early September this document was completed,

<sup>3</sup>R. H. Legge, who wrote the life of Shield in the *Dict. Nat. Biog.*, follows the erroneous statement in G. G. Cunningham's *History of England in the lives of Englishmen*, London, 1853, Vol. VIII, p. 361, that this journey was taken in August, 1792.

<sup>4</sup>See Shield's letters to Holcroft, Holcroft's *Memoirs*, p. 308 ff.

<sup>5</sup>Cunningham and Legge state that Ritson continued to Italy, but this is clearly an error. Ritson makes no mention of any other city than Paris, and Shield does not refer to him as a member of the party in the later stages of the extended journey. Ritson had certainly returned to London by November 26.

<sup>6</sup>*Letters*, I, pp. 203-4.

<sup>7</sup>In the Scots' College he saw the testament and letters of Mary, Queen of Scots, "blotted with her tears". *Scottish Songs*, I, p. xlix.

revised, and accepted by Louis. Upon this signal success of their designs the populace became jubilant, and there were gala-nights in Paris. The sole topic of conversation seemed to be the Constitution, and the people were happy, forgiving, and hopeful.<sup>8</sup> The effect of this exuberance and enthusiasm upon Ritson is shown in his correspondence. He says nothing of struggle, of lawlessness, of bloodshed; but he extols the principles for which the people were fighting and praises in unmeasured language the new constitution. To Harrison he writes, in the first letter after his return:

"Well, and so I got to Paris at last; and was highly gratified with the whole of my excursion. I admire the French more than ever. They deserve to be free, and they really are so. You have read their new constitution: can anything be more admirable? We, who pretend to be free, you know, have no constitution at all. . . . As to modern politics, and the principles of the Constitution, one would think that half the people in Paris had no other employment than to study and talk about them. I have seen a fishwoman reading the journal of the National assembly to her neighbor who appeared to listen with all the avidity of Shakespeare's blacksmith. You may now consider this government as completely settled, and a counter-revolution as utterly impossible: They are more than a match for all the slaves in Europe."<sup>9</sup>

To another correspondent he writes in the same strain:

"My sentiments are and ever have been so entirely correspondent to the ruling measures that I had only to rejoice at seeing a theory I had so long admired reduced to practise. I know that you and I do not exactly agree in our political principles. Your creed if I mistake not, is that a few men, whether born with boots and spurs or at least who have got them on, have a right to bridle, saddle and harness the rest, and ride or drive them with as much gentleness or violence as they see occasion; and that it is much more advisable for the latter to jog on peaceably and quietly than by kicking or flinging to provoke a larger portion of hard blows and hunger. This I believe is a pretty fair representation. . . . They order these matters very differently in the country I was speaking of, which, owing to the dissemination and establishment of those sacred and fundamental principles of liberty and equality, enjoys a degree of happiness and prosperity to which it had hitherto been a stranger: but which is merely typical of that to which it will shortly arrive."<sup>10</sup>

Coming from Ritson this extravagant praise of democratic government is quite surprising. When it is recalled that he who now states that his "sentiments are and ever have been entirely correspondent to the ruling measures" of the French revolution, is the same, who, eleven years before had compiled, and only eight years earlier had revised

<sup>8</sup>Carlyle, *History of the French Revolution*, London, 1898, Vol. I, p. 195ff.

<sup>9</sup>*Letters*, I, p. 203-4.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, I, pp. 208-9.

for a second edition, the *Tables of the Descent of the Crown*, and who, in publications ranging through a decade had lost no opportunity to condemn in violent language those who under whatsoever pretext had sought to set aside the "legitimate and inviolable lineal descent" to the English throne,<sup>11</sup> there appears to be a glaring inconsistency. When it is remembered, too, that he who now declares with so much confidence that "we have no constitution at all", is the same who, on several occasions heartily condemned the Revolution Parliament with having done more to destroy the English constitution than all other parliaments had done to preserve it,<sup>12</sup> it is still more apparent that a radical change of belief has taken place. It is not difficult to substantiate Ritson's statement that he had always admired the French people, but his earlier remarks concerning them have nothing to do with the revolutionary temper which they later exhibited. For instance, he strenuously denied the validity of the claim of Henry V. to the throne of France and took occasion to commend Joan of Arc and to praise the ill-starred Dauphin.<sup>13</sup> He likewise lauded the poetic ability and the keen intellectual qualities of the French.<sup>14</sup> But none of these comments can, without violence, be adduced in support of his praise of the principles for which the French people struggled in the Revolution.

It is clear that Ritson's political faith had suffered a definite reversal. The erstwhile Jacobite is now an avowed Jacobin; the sometime Tory is now a Whig of the most liberal complexion. He declared that he "detested every species of aristocracy"; yet he seems to waver slightly in the advice he gives his nephew concerning the authority of historians.

"Always prefer Tory or Jacobite writers", he says, "the Whigs are the greatest liars in the world. You consult history for facts, not principles. The Whigs, I allow, have the advantage in the latter, and this advantage they are constantly laboring to support by a misrepresentation of the former."<sup>15</sup>

But this is only his historical judgment asserting itself in the midst of enthusiasm. The critical temper which served admirably in all his literary labors did not entirely desert him in his political zeal. By its aid he discovered the unworthy motives of many of the republican leaders in his own country. But this was after he had joined their ranks and had been for some time associated with them.

<sup>11</sup>See *Remarks*, pp. 84, 137, 188, etc.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 124; *English Songs*, I, p. lxxxii.

<sup>13</sup>*Remarks*, p. 104; Preface to *Ancient Songs*.

<sup>14</sup>See Prefaces to *English Songs* and *Ancient Songs*.

<sup>15</sup>*Letters*, II, p. 121.

The spirit of the revolutionists had a firm grip upon Ritson. Almost immediately upon his return to England he began addressing his intimate friends as "Citizen" and used the complimentary close of the republicans in most of his letters. Early in 1793 he adopted the new republican calendar and struggled for some months to become perfect in its use. At the same time he declared himself a disciple of the leading philosophers of the Revolution and adorned the walls of his chamber with portraits of Paine, Rousseau, and Voltaire. He realized that this was not a step in the direction of popularity, for on sending *Inégalité des hommes* to his nephew, he remarked:

"The excellent author looks down upon me; on the other side of the fireplace hangs the sarcastic Voltaire; while the enlightened and enlightening Thomas fronts the door: which is probably the reason, by the way, that scarce anybody has entered it since he made his appearance."<sup>16</sup>

During this period he renewed his friendship with Holcroft<sup>17</sup> and sought the acquaintance of Godwin, Thelwall, and other Revolutionary leaders in England. He visited freely with these men and followed their political fortunes very closely.<sup>18</sup> He advised his nephew to become familiar with their writings, which contained "much deep and just reflection as well as excellent writing." And he himself commented frequently on their publications as well as on their political ups and downs.<sup>19</sup>

The first few years after Ritson's return from Paris were, to use his own words, ticklish times for the advocates of Liberty and Equality in England. Thomas Hardy founded "The London Corresponding Society" in January, 1792. In September the Society sent a congratulatory address to the National Convention of France and before the end of the year was in correspondence "with every Society in Great Britain which had been instituted for the purpose of obtaining by legal and constitutional means a reform in the Commons' house of Parliament."<sup>20</sup> The rapid increase of the corresponding societies and their unconcealed intercourse with the republican leaders in France caused the Government to adopt stringent measures to suppress or exterminate them. The cooperation of Horne Tooke's "Society for Constitutional Information,"<sup>21</sup> and John Thelwall's "Society of the Friends of the

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, II, p. 39.

<sup>17</sup>Sidney Lee, in the *Dict. Nat. Biog.*, implies that Ritson first made the acquaintance of Holcroft at this time, but he knew him at Stockton.

<sup>18</sup>*Letters*, II, p. 34; Holcroft's *Memoirs*; C. K. Paul's *William Godwin, his friends and contemporaries*, 2 vols., London, 1876, Vol. I, p. 78.

<sup>19</sup>*Letters*, II, p. 49, 86, 112.

<sup>20</sup>*Memoir of Thomas Hardy*, London, 1832, p. 24.

<sup>21</sup>See Alexander Stephens, *The Life of John Horne Tooke*, London, 1813.

People'<sup>22</sup> with Hardy's organization resulted in the arrest of all the leaders in the summer of 1794. On October 5 true bills were returned against them and eight others. On October 28 Hardy's trial was begun amid great excitement. His acquittal, on November 5, was followed within a month by those of Horne Tooke and Thelwall. The Government's case was so weak that the rest of the defendants were discharged without trial, to the great delight of the people and the extreme relief of many members of the Societies who felt themselves to be under the surveillance of spies.<sup>23</sup>

Ritson followed these trials with a great deal of interest, for his own strong sympathy with the defendants was known among his friends, and he well knew that one might be arrested on suspicion engendered by such sympathy. It seemed to be the custom of the government, he said, to suspect a man of Jacobinism and hang him for felony in order to be rid of him.<sup>24</sup> He was careful to write nothing that would incriminate him<sup>25</sup> and declared that he talked politics as little as possible, "in order to avoid Newgate,"<sup>26</sup> yet he seems not to have felt perfectly secure until after the Government had failed in two attempts at conviction. At the acquittal of Horne Tooke he breathed a sigh of relief and remarked that the storm had now blown over, and he considered himself safe.<sup>27</sup> The success of the Revolutionists in their first encounter with the Government gave them a great deal of confidence in the justice of their cause and, as is not unusual in such cases, they almost immediately destroyed the confidence of unprejudiced persons by extravagances and inconsistency. "Their constant cant" says Ritson, "is the force and energy of mind to which all opposition is to be ineffectual."<sup>28</sup> They declared that no member of their Society under suspicion should have hired defense at his trial but should depend upon his own eloquence and the undoubted justice of his case. While the leaders were perfectly willing to endorse this rule as an abstract principle, yet when their own safety was in jeopardy they exerted every effort to secure the best legal

<sup>22</sup>See *The Life of John Thelwall*, London, 1837.

<sup>23</sup>See J. Smith, *The Story of the English Jacobins*, London, 1881, and Howell's *State Trials*, London, 1816-28, Vols. XXIII-XXIV.

<sup>24</sup>*Letters*, II, p. 103.

<sup>25</sup>On March 5, 1794, he addressed Laing as "My friend" and explained the salutation thus: "I do not call you Citizen, lest, when I revisit your metropolis, your scoundrel judges should send me for fourteen years to Botany Bay; only I am in good hopes, before that event takes place, they will all be sent to the devil". *Ibid.*, II, p. 47.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, II, p. 7.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, II, p. 57.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, II, p. 69.

talent in their behalf. Although it was Ritson's own theory that the innocent need no hired defense at the criminal bar, yet he was extremely disgusted at the inconsistency of some of the Revolutionists and condemned their selfishness. "Mister Yorke, (for a culprit in a black silk coat does not appear to deserve the title of citizen)"<sup>29</sup> was one of the worst offenders. Upon his arrest in 1795 he sent out a popular appeal for funds to aid in his defense, preferring to keep his own fortune intact. This form of mendicancy Ritson especially abominated, and he was delighted that Yorke was sentenced to a fine and imprisonment in spite of all his trouble.<sup>30</sup>

The dissatisfaction with the republican leaders registered in these comments of Ritson soon ripened into thorough disgust. He considered them not only inconsistent but insincere. "To confess the truth", he said, "the more I see of these modern patriots and philosophers the less I like them." Holcroft and Godwin fell under his particular censure: the former for his over-weening egotism; the latter for the want of courage to face the full consequences of the practical application of his philosophy. Holcroft regretted keenly that he had not been allowed to display his oratorical talents at his trial and declared that he would gladly have given one of his hands for the opportunity of making his own defense; "which", Ritson remarked, "would certainly have hanged him, however favorable his judges might have been beforehand."<sup>31</sup> Godwin was ridiculed for recognizing the authority of an institution which he professed to hold in contempt by having his marriage with Mary Wollstonecraft sanctioned by the ceremonies of the Church of England.<sup>32</sup> Ritson's quarrel with Godwin over the loan of books and money no doubt intensified his bitterness. On January 16, 1801, he wrote to the philosopher: "I wish you would make it convenient to return me the thirty pounds I lent you." Godwin was unable to repay the money, but he sent a copy of his tragedy, which he hoped would please Ritson. The critic replied in surly tones:

"Though you have not ability to repay the money I lent, you might have integrity enough to return the books you borrowed. . . . I never received a copy of your unfortunate tragedy: nor, from the fate it experienced, and the character I have read and heard of it, can I profess myself very anxious for its perusal."

But the unctuous Godwin was not in the least disturbed by the consequences of Ritson's "transient misapprehension", and by repaying a

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, II, p. 96.

<sup>30</sup>Howell, *Op. Cit.*, Vol. XXV, p. 1154.

<sup>31</sup>*Letters*, II, p. 63.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, II, p. 154.

few pounds of the loan, and by the discreet employment of flattery succeeded in drawing from him a half-hearted apology.<sup>33</sup>

But even though Ritson became disgusted with the methods employed by the Revolutionary leaders in England, he continued until near his death to hope for a transplanting of the French spirit to his own country. Upon his return from France he was anxious that the English people should enjoy a degree of freedom equal to that of the French. This end could be gained only by a revolution, and he thought the upheaval would be sudden and violent. The work of the Corresponding Societies and of the republican orators had its effect, but he looked to dissatisfaction with economic conditions for the real source of a popular uprising. In 1793 he wrote:

"With respect to a revolution, though I think it at no great distance, it seems to defy all calculations for the present. If the increase of taxes, the decline of manufacture, the high price of provisions, and the like, have no effect upon the apathy of the sans culottes here, one can expect little from the reasoning of philosophers or politicians. When the pot boils violently, however, it is not always in the Cook's power to prevent some of the fat from falling into the fire."<sup>34</sup>

He continued for some time to hope that the English people would work out their own salvation, but with the progress of hostilities between the French republic and Holland, and between England and Spain, he looked forward to a French invasion which would establish the ideal government on the island. Everything, he said, was to be hoped from the success of the French in Holland, nothing without it. After nearly a decade of waiting, in "momentary expectation of the French fleet", he abandoned hope of any great assistance from the continent. The republicans were already proving themselves unworthy of the high confidence he had placed in them, and with the change of the English ministry in 1801 he prayed for a "settled and permanent peace".<sup>35</sup>

It has been stated in Chambers's *Book of Days*<sup>36</sup> and in the *Dictionary of National Biography* that Ritson's admiration for the heroes of the French Revolution led him to adopt their atheistic religious views. But it is apparent from a survey of his letters and publications that, while his visit to France and his subsequent interest in the leaders of the Revolution undoubtedly intensified his animosity to orthodox religion, they were not the source of it. From the time of his earliest book, which appeared nine years before his foreign visit, he was outspoken in condemnation of the Bible, the church, and all religious sects. There is no

<sup>33</sup>C. K. Paul, *Op. Cit.*, II, p. 61 ff.

<sup>34</sup>*Letters*, II, pp. 23, 42.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, II, pp. 63, 128, 182, 205.

<sup>36</sup>Vol. II, p. 406.



evidence of religious training in his early life, and he seems to have brought to his work a deep-seated aversion to all organized faiths. In his prefatory dissertations he made frequent and always disparaging allusions to the historical importance of Christianity. It was his declared opinion that the christianizing of the Saxons was their undoing, and he dated the "perversion of true history" from the time when it began to be written by monks, and the "disgrace of English literature" from the age in which the legends of the Christian saints were believed and promulgated.

"While the Saxons continued pagans", he writes, "they were unquestionably a brave and warlike nation; but upon their conversion to Christianity their kings became monks, the people cowards and slaves, unable to defend themselves, and a prey to every invader."<sup>37</sup>

Elsewhere he asked what advantages the Saxons had gained, how much their understanding had been enlightened, or how much their morals had been improved, to counterbalance the destruction of their national genius and spirit as a result of their accepting the Christian faith.<sup>38</sup> According to his theory the origin of romance was to be sought

"in the different systems of superstition which have from time to time prevailed, whether pagan or Christian. The gods of the ancient heathens and the saints of the more modern Christians, are the same sort of imaginary beings who alternately give existence to romances, and receive it from them. The legends of the one and the fables of the other, have been constantly fabricated for the same purpose, and with the same view—the promotion of fanaticism, which, being mere illusion, can only be excited or supported by romance. . . . There is this distinction indeed, between the heathen deities and the Christian saints, that the fables of the former were indebted for their existence to the flowery imagination of the sublime poet, and the legends of the latter to the gloomy fanaticism of a lazy monk or stinking priest."<sup>39</sup>

Closely enwrapped in this scorn for the historical prestige of the church was a contemptuous disrespect for its ministers, both medieval and modern. "A piper", he exclaimed, "is preferable to a parson".<sup>40</sup> He thought it because of the "malicious endeavors of pitiful monks, by whom history was consecrated to the crimes and follies of titled ruffians and sainted idiots", that the "patriotic exertions and virtuous acts" of

<sup>37</sup>*Metrical Romances*, I, p. 33.

<sup>38</sup>*English Songs*, I, pp. xlvi, lviii, etc. In one of the cancelled passages in *Metrical Romances*, he declared the Saxons would have been better off if they had never had a Bible to read. See Appendix B.

<sup>39</sup>*Met. Roms.*, I, p. 19.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 109.

Robin Hood had not been recorded for the edification of posterity.<sup>41</sup> But the crimes of the early churchmen were not merely negative. In the distorted vision of this hypochondriac critic they had fathered upon English history and literature an incubus from which they had struggled in vain to free themselves. He writes:

"The forgery and fabrication of lying legends, of James the son of Zebedee, Simon Zealot, Simon Peter and Saint Paul . . . and many more such nonentities, all forgery and falsehood, have been greedily swallowed up . . . to the pollution of true history and the everlasting disgrace of English literature."<sup>42</sup>

With the churchmen of his own day he was no less unreasonable. If his indefensible violence towards Percy and Warton was not intensified by their connection with the church, at least his sneering allusions to their ecclesiastical position would make such a deduction almost inevitable.<sup>43</sup> He took no pains to save their moral feelings but seemed rather to embrace every opportunity to expose what he considered an inconsistency between their religious profession and their literary practice.<sup>44</sup>

For the church as an historical institution Ritson professed no respect, and he had only jeers for the various religious sects. He spoke with fluency of "Calvanistic bigotry",<sup>45</sup> of the "fanatical puritans", and of "those modern puritans, the methodists".<sup>46</sup> Concerning his nephew's early training he wrote to Wadson:

"I know not whence you collect any intention in me of making him a papist, unless you suppose that papacy and fiddling necessarily go together. I shall rely on your care in preventing his mother's making a methodist of him: but must insist that you do not attempt to make him a presbyterian, which, if there be any difference in such sectarists, is the worst among them."<sup>47</sup>

He thought his sister's long illness was only a religious melancholy and severely reprimanded his nephew for joining the "gang of methodists" who intensified her complaint by singing and praying.<sup>48</sup> It was his earnest wish that there should be no singing of hymns at his sister's funeral and no clergyman present at his own burial.

<sup>41</sup>*Robin Hood*, I, pp. xv, viv.

<sup>42</sup>*King Arthur*, p. 126.

<sup>43</sup>This was the point of view taken by his contemporaries and emphasized in all the *Reviews*. Percy laid much stress on this point in correspondence concerning Ritson:

<sup>44</sup>His satirization of the religious comments of Johnson and Steevens will be recalled in this connection.

<sup>45</sup>*Ancient Songs*, I, p. xxvii.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. lxxviii; *Scottish Songs*, I, p. cii; *Letters*, I, p. 100.

<sup>47</sup>*Letters*, I, p. 24.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 101.

After such an array of testimony concerning Ritson's position with regard to the church and churchmen, there can be little question as to his personal beliefs. Although there appears nowhere in his published works or in the extant correspondence an explicit statement on the point, he owned no belief in a supreme being and was undoubtedly an atheist. Robert Smith, who was perhaps as intimate with Ritson as any member of the Inn, declared that he did not think him an atheist. But his reasoning is by no means convincing. If he were an atheist, he said, "why should he send up ejaculations to God, or talk of the Devil tormenting people whom he believed had used him very ill?"<sup>49</sup> Ritson, himself, would have called these expressions simply foolish and unmeaning oaths which were neither wicked nor criminal.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, Mrs. Kirby, who had known Ritson from his youth up, said he certainly was an atheist, for he had often declared himself such to her.

"He did not believe there was any such being as Almighty God, or that there was any future state of rewards or punishment, and the greatest devil he knew was a nasty, crabbed, ill-natured old woman."<sup>51</sup>

This statement, in itself, is not, of course, conclusive evidence of Ritson's atheism, but it fits in perfectly with the general character of his remarks on religion and with the opinion held by him by his contemporaries.<sup>52</sup>

On the question of belief in a future state Ritson was more specific. In the first year of the nineteenth century he wrote to his "worthy, venerable, and very dear friend," Harrison, congratulating him on his long life, and in that letter remarked:

"You know my sentiments with regard to other worlds, which I believe, are not likely to change. My health is much impaired, my frame disordered, and my spirits depressed; so that I have no hopes for myself of an eternal existence; and am rather, in fact, disposed to wonder that I have lived so long; having had the mortification to see many whom I loved and esteemed drop from time to time around me at a much more immature age."<sup>53</sup>

Although he could at times write in this calm and dispassionate manner,

<sup>49</sup>Appendix A.

<sup>50</sup>See Appendix B.

<sup>51</sup>Appendix A. Mrs. Kirby likewise maintained that Ritson played the hypocrite in taking the oaths of allegiance, supremacy, and abjuration on his admission to the bar. If he thought of the significance of these oaths at all, Ritson probably considered them as a mere form to be gone through with in order to reach his goal.

<sup>52</sup>See the reviews of any of the publications which contain essays. Haslewood, *Op. Cit.*, p. 3, note, states that a letter was written to a person then living (1824) declaring his poignant regret, even to tearfulness, that it had been his misfortune to live an unbeliever.

<sup>53</sup>*Letters*, II, p. 205.

there were occasions when he viewed life, and perhaps death, less steadily. His illness resulted, at the end of his life, in frequent mental aberrations. In these last days he devoted his energy to an attempt to prove Christ an impostor. This pamphlet was never finished. It was laid aside a short time before he was permanently bereft of reason, and the sheets already written were destroyed in the flames. The religiously inclined of his own day believed that remorse had seized him and that by the hand of Providence he was arrested in this final sacreligious undertaking.<sup>54</sup>

A consideration of Ritson's destructive comments affords an accurate but not an adequate view of his principles: accurate because it reveals his attitude toward religious affairs; inadequate because it does not include his ethical creed. He was a man of uncompromising moral integrity. His insistence on fidelity and honesty in editorial labors is well known. To deceive, to simulate, to shirk one's duty, was to incur his wrath. And this had to do not only with literary matters; he held the same standards for every activity of life. In his letters of counsel to his nephew he emphasized right and honest action. On one occasion he wrote to Frank, then a mere boy:

"Never hesitate between a beggar and a half-penny worth of nuts. I know not whether by adopting this maxim you may (as the Scripture says) 'lay up treasures in heaven', but this I am sure of, that the relish of a good action will continue longer and be a thousand times more grateful than that of an apple."<sup>55</sup>

From the very first his philosophy was grounded on humanitarian principles. After enumerating various inhuman practises, he admonishes his youthful nephew thus:

"All these you ought to detest and abhor; and, by following the contrary and opposite paths of Reason and Virture, you will obtain, or what is the same thing, deserve the love and esteem of everyone who knows you; and if they do not make you a great man, they will at least make you a good one which is a much superior, and far more excellent character."<sup>56</sup>

Reason and virtue are not clearly defined, but Ritson's test of the reasonableness of an act, and so of its rightness or wrongness, was its utility. "What is *right* or *wrong* but that which is *useful* or *pernicious*?" he asks late in life; "is there any other criterion?"<sup>57</sup> His

<sup>54</sup>See Selby's letters, Appendix A.

<sup>55</sup>*Letters*, I, p. 64.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 21.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, II, p. 90.

acceptance of Reason<sup>58</sup> as the guide of conduct allied him with the Revolutionary leaders and cut him off effectually from the disciples of revealed religion. With undoubted sincerity he lived the present life according to what he considered the most exalted standards, and if, with this, he had not the consolation of a future existence, he deserves rather the commiseration than the condemnation and ridicule of those who consider themselves more fortunate.

The new enthusiasm engendered by Ritson's visit to Paris operated to revive his waning interest in orthographical reform. In his early publications, especially the *Versees*, *English Songs*, and the Shakespeare pamphlets, he had undertaken to reform the English language by systematizing its spelling. The full extent of his system is not known. As far as he developed it, it consisted in discarding the capital I when not at the beginning of a sentence and in giving all words ending in e their full form when suffixes were added. These attempts at so-called reform met with so little encouragement and so much ridicule that Ritson was discouraged from pushing the matter further. In the last Shakespeare pamphlet (1790) he said that although his system of spelling required further elucidation he had no inclination to continue it. At the end of the year he gave Walker a further reason for abandoning his efforts in this direction:

"I was much pleased to find you had had the resolution to discard the capital I from the middle of a sentence. Nothing can be urged in its favor but the ordinary argument of prejudice against improvement, that it is an innovation. I have sometimes attempted little reforms of this nature, but I find a spirit of ignorance and bigotry so universally prevalent, that I have been compelled as it were to abandon every idea of the sort, though I shall always applaud the man who has courage enough to pluck the Blatant Beast by the beard."<sup>59</sup>

In the fall of the next year he visited France and returned to England with sufficient courage to beard the lion in his own den, which he did by flaunting innovations of spelling in all his subsequent publications. The first letter written after his return to London, the exuberant republicanism of which has already been noted, was crowded full of strange spellings. After the second sentence he remarked parenthetically: "You observe, by the way, i am teaching you how to spell". And at the end of the letter he invited criticism with the confidence of one whose position is unassailable: "if you know any cause or just impediment why words should not be spelled in my way you are to declare it". Yet with all

<sup>58</sup>There is no external evidence of Ritson's indebtedness to either Bentham or Hume. He might have got his philosophy from them or from any of the Revolutionary leaders; the doctrine was sufficiently current.

<sup>59</sup>*Letters*, I, p. 177.

his new enthusiasm, Ritson professed not to be an advocate of innovation merely because it was innovation. Joseph Frank carried his uncle's general scheme of reform further than Ritson was willing to go. He wished to abolish the capital letter at the beginning of a line of poetry when not also the beginning of a sentence<sup>60</sup> and to substitute "thou" for "you" in familiar address. Ritson answered that there was no sufficient reason for abolishing fixed and universal customs in language unless it could be proved that the benefit accruing from the change would considerably overbalance the confusion resulting from such an innovation,—and this, he said, could not be demonstrated in these two cases. "Until convinced to the contrary, I am entitled to maintain that the practise is right, merely in short, because it is a practise. Never wake a sleeping lion."<sup>61</sup>

But Ritson did not follow his own excellent advice. Although the use of "himself", "themselves", etc., had become established, he prepared a dissertation purporting to prove that "self is always a substantive; as in 'myself', 'thysself', etc., and, consequently 'himself' is anomalous and absurd."<sup>62</sup> The process of dropping the *k* from words ending in *-ck* had become quite noticeable by this time.<sup>63</sup> But for the sake of consistency Ritson wished to restore it. His reason is thus stated:

"It appears that as many words still continue to end in *-ck* as have been made to end in *-c*; and, as the privation cannot possibly be applied to the former list, I conclude it will be the best method not to apply it to the latter. There may be some exceptions, as no rule is without them: but your question should have been not why the *k* is to be preserved in such and such words, but why it came to be rejected from them."<sup>64</sup>

To revise English orthography and grammar with a view to absolute consistency would be a gigantic task, impossible for any single man to accomplish and equally impossible for any body of men unless clothed with unlimited authority. Left to its natural course language develops irregularly and often illogically, and this too, in spite of the efforts of reformers and systematizers.

Ritson worked with his system of spelling and grammar for many

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, II, p. 39. This innovation Capell had employed in his *Prolusions*, 1760, only to meet with universal ridicule and contempt.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, II, pp. 85, 89, 96.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, II, p. 144.

<sup>63</sup>John Walker's *Rhyming Dictionary*, London, 1775, gives a list of several hundred words in *-ck*, and another of practically equal length from which the *k* has been dropped.

<sup>64</sup>*Letters*, II, p. 106.

years, yet he never came to the point of absolute certainty on all its phases. In 1795 he wrote:

"I have scarcely courage enough to apply my principles of orthography to the verb and participle in *-en*: not knowing well what to do with the words given, driven, riven, etc., etc. However, I take ripeen, hasteen, spokeen, etc., to be perfectly accurate."<sup>65</sup>

But uncertainty on particular points did not deter him from employing many innovations of his system in his published works. Each volume was more forbidding in appearance than its predecessor, and after his return from France the promiscuous use of mutilated forms rendered much of his text obsolete and well nigh unintelligible. It was often necessary for him to modify his spelling as well as his religious sentiments in order to secure a publisher, and the editors of all his posthumous publications found it necessary to "reduce his orthography to the recognized standard of our language". There is no reason to believe, as these editors have stated, that Ritson would have modernized the spelling himself if he had lived to see the books through the press.<sup>66</sup> Under wholly different circumstances this might have been possible. But as illness with its consequent insanity settled down upon him he became more eccentric in every way and more violently aggressive in exhibiting his idiosyncrasies.

From his own day to ours Ritson's orthography has been made the butt of numerous critics. A factitious letter in the *Monthly Mirror* for August, 1803, put together by "Old Nick", ludicrously exposed some of his variations from the common rules of spelling. Subsequent writers declare that his orthography was based on no conception of the relations of words but was the caprice of fancy and the sport of a crank.<sup>67</sup> That it was, especially in his later years, largely the result of fancy and caprice there can be no doubt. But it is equally true that it had its inception and its early nurture in what he himself erroneously believed to be the accurate rules of historical grammar. His fault was in not realizing the essentially plastic nature of language and its consequent instability, so that the rules of Shakespeare's time, even though they could be with absolute certainty determined, would not apply to our own. Ritson published nothing to compare with Elphinston's *Propriety ascertained in her picture, or English Speech and Spelling mutual guides*,

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup>See Prefaces to the various posthumous publications. Joseph Frank's patent efforts to exculpate his uncle explain many of these assertions.

<sup>67</sup>See especially, Haslewood, *Op. Cit.*, p. 29; H. A. Beers, *English Romanticism in the eighteenth century*, p. 297; De Quincey's *Works*, Vol. XI, p. 441. For contemporary remarks see the reviews of any of his books.

and his *English Orthogography epitomized, and Propriety's pocket-dictionary*; but the three treatises which he did prepare no doubt embodied his grammatical and orthographical systems. If these should be recovered to supplement the scattered remarks already known, it could be determined whether Ritson stood on solid historical ground. Without them he is only to be classed with Capell, Elphinston, Pinkerton, Landor, and others of the large body of "orthographic mutineers" whose peculiar eccentricities have served mainly to amuse the public.

We have already seen the origin of Ritson's vegetarianism in the reading, at nineteen years of age, of Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*. By his own statement he was induced, only after serious reflection, to take up this mode of life, and throughout his remaining years he adhered to it in the face of scorn, ridicule, and volent abuse. There is a very reasonable doubt as to whether this habit of diet was a mere fad, as it has been continually called. Even though his reasons for abjuring animal food were purely personal, yet they were founded on what he believed to be the unshakable rock of Reason and Virtue. He was fundamentally and sincerely humanitarian in nature, feeling deeply for all the lower forms of life and repeatedly declaring that animals had as much right to the full enjoyments of life as man himself. In limiting his diet to vegetable food he felt that he was not only conserving life but that he was contributing to his own happiness by freeing his conscience from the accusation of murder. He was anxious that others should enjoy the mental tranquility which he maintained always accompanied abstinence from animal food, and so he sought to make proselytes. His young nephew was not unnaturally his first convert. In the letters to him, along with an exaggerated idea of the importance of his pet hobby, Ritson propounded much sound advice and good common sense.

His earliest counsel to Frank was primarily humanitarian. In 1781 he wrote:

"Cruelty and barbarity or wantonness to brute animals, birds, insects, or any other living thing which you might have power over; not forgetting the inhuman custom of taking birds' nests, eggs, etc., which is abominable: all this you ought to detest and abhor."<sup>68</sup>

A few months later he said: "humanity and good nature are the first and highest virtues that the mind of man is capable of entertaining."<sup>69</sup> Within a year from this time he had, by force of reason and the offer of a small monthly stipend, persuaded Frank of the virtue of eating no meat. He praised his nephew for persisting "so heroically in a mode

<sup>68</sup>Letters, I, p. 21.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., I, p. 29.



of living, which you will one day or other find to have been of essential service both to your body and mind, by preserving health and a good conscience, neither of which you could possibly have if you addicted yourself to the unnatural and diabolical practise of devouring your fellow creatures, as pigs and geese undoubtedly are."<sup>70</sup> This is the strain in which his comments always run. With the single-mindedness of the fanatic, he did not appreciate the absurdity of his theories when pushed to extremes. It was apparently easy for him to declare, for he said it more than once, and no doubt came firmly to believe it, that no one who ate animal food could have a sound mind, a strong body, or a clear conscience. The result in his own case gave eloquent testimony to the fallacy of his reasoning.

Frank was a willing and enthusiastic disciple and appealed to his uncle in doubtful cases. After eggs had been added to the list of contraband, he asked if it was improper to eat a pudding which contained eggs. Ritson replied, drawing a very nice distinction:

"I think that if a pudding stand before you, you are not obliged to refuse it on account of the eggs. I do not myself. But I should never *direct* a pudding to be made for me with eggs in it."<sup>71</sup>

With boyish enthusiasm Frank carried into practice the humanitarian principles which he had learned, and on one occasion, at least, Ritson was obliged to write to his sister a mild protest on the unforeseen results of his teaching:

"I rather think Joe went a little too far in putting Mrs. Wiseman's cat to death for killing a mouse, which, perhaps nature, certainly education had taught her to look upon as a duty."<sup>72</sup>

Ritson's sister was his second and last known convert to vegetarianism. In her case, as in his own, the results were unfortunate and all but fatal. His tender solicitation on the occasion of her illness reveals the affection and compassion of the nature which lay back of his eccentric and uninviting manner. Following his suggestion she had limited herself to a vegetable diet, but the sudden change of a life-long habit so impaired her strength that she was reduced to serious illness, and the judicious use of wines and meats was prescribed as the only means of restoring her to health. In deference to her brother she re-

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 39.

<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 41.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 95. There is no support for Mrs. Kirby's assertion that Ritson drove Frank out of chambers because he ate animal food. The correspondence of uncle and nephew is continuous and gives no hint of a misunderstanding on this point.

fused to comply with these instructions. Learning of the serious consequences of his teaching, Ritson hastened to inform her that he had never meant his words to be taken so literally nor followed to such extremes.

"I hardly wished and never expected", he wrote apologetically, "that my scruples on this head would influence you so far as to make you give up the mode of living to which you have always been accustomed. Certainly not that you would resolve to deny yourself what everybody about you, nay, even almost the whole world, eats without concern or reflection, when your very existence might perhaps depend upon it. I shall not weary you with further argument. I only hope and desire that as you relinquished the use of this food out of complaisance to me as a philosopher, you will now revive it out of affection for me as a brother."<sup>73</sup>

Ritson made no secret of his aversion to animal food; it was one of the things that everybody knew about him. His unpleasant encounter with Leyden at Lasswade cottage grew out of an argument on the eating of meat. He frequently dropped into letters to close friends arguments aimed to persuade them to desist from animal food. Wade-son played a practical joke on him by pretending to be almost persuaded never to taste another morsel of meat, when in reality he was gormandizing all the while. When Ritson discovered the deception, he expostulated in mock seriousness, concluding thus:

"But, alas! miracles will never cease!—and god knows whether I myself, who am thus preaching to you, and set such an example of temperance and humanity to all, may not be found one day or other devouring lambs and turkeys, geese and capons, and all other creatures which earth, air, or sea, can furnish, and the luxury of the most voluptuous epicures have for these thousand years past been day by day singling out for the beastly satisfaction of their unnatural appetites."<sup>74</sup>

This is excellent sarcasm. So long as an individual can treat of his own personal foibles and eccentricities in this fashion he is on the safe side of the dividing line between sanity and lunacy. But it is comparatively easy for peculiarities of thought and manner to be so exaggerated as to lead almost insensibly into insanity. Unfortunately this was the trend of Ritson's crotchets. Their final summation in *An Essay on Abstinence from Animal Food as a Moral Duty*, 1802, contains many evidences of insanity. The ear-marks of idiosyncrasy were so numerous on this manuscript that Ritson did not readily find a publisher for it. It was at length accepted at the Jacobinical shop

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 49.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 32.

of Richard Phillips,<sup>75</sup> a kindred spirit and himself a Pythagorean. Ritson expressed his gratitude to Phillips by a complimentary allusion to the abstemiousness of his publisher.<sup>76</sup>

In this Essay Ritson played his usual rôle of compiler. He listed a large number of extracts from various sources and then arranged them with a view to illustrate the propriety of abstinence from animal food. Of the ten chapters in the book the first, "Of Man", and the last, "Humanity", stand somewhat in the relation of prologue and epilogue to the body of the work. In the prologue Ritson relates the various accounts of the origin of man, from Homer to the "sensible and eloquent Rousseau", omitting the Biblical account. The original man was the same as, if not identical with, the orang-outang.<sup>77</sup> Through the centuries of so-called civilization he had retained the destructive traits of his forbears and had even excelled them in rapacity and cruelty. The dog is the natural enemy to the cat, the cat to the rat, the fox to the goose, the ferret to the rabbit, the spider to the fly; the whole animal creation being a system for the express purpose of preying upon each other, and for their mutual misery and destruction. Man stands at the head of this great system of cruelty and ferocity, whereas, by the very fact that he is man he ought to be superior to these purely animal characteristics.

"The only mode in which man can be useful or happy, with respect either to the generality or to the individual, is to be just, mild, merciful, benevolent, humane, or, at least, innocent and harmless, whether such qualities be natural or not; but if the present system of bloodshed, cruelty, malignance, and mischief, should continue, it would be better that such diabolical monsters should cease to exist."<sup>78</sup>

By this high-sounding arraignment of the sins of man Ritson means simply to condemn his habit of eating animal food—this is the root of all evil. It is the cause of cruelty and ferocity, of human sacrifices,

<sup>75</sup>Richard Phillips (1767-1840) was a radical whose shop became headquarters for the advanced democratic literature of the revolutionary epoch. His *Golden Rules of Social Philosophy*, 1826, contains "The Author's reasons for not eating animal food".

<sup>76</sup>*Abstinence from Animal Food*, p. 201.

<sup>77</sup>In foreshadowing the later theory of the origin of man and his ascent or descent from the lower forms, Ritson has been anticipated by James Burnett, Lord Monboddo, (1714-1799) in his six volume work *On the Origin and Progress of Language*, 1773-92. (See also Knight, *Lord Monboddo and some of his contemporaries*, 1900). It seems hardly probable that Ritson did not know this publication, although he makes no allusion to it. He quotes frequently from *The Philosophy of Natural History*, 1780-9, of Burnett's friend, William Smellie.

<sup>78</sup>*Abstinence from Animal Food*, p. 38 ff.

and of cannibalism, to each of which he devotes a chapter. Besides, animal food is not natural to man. There are flesh-eating animals to be sure, but these, Ritson says, are the extremely vicious, and they possess these reprehensible traits as a result of their carnivorous appetites, not as the cause of them. Man, being naturally a more gentle animal, has corrupted and vitiated himself by indulgence in flesh and has consequently taken on the attributes of the worst animals. But Ritson feels that his arguments of the evil consequences of animal food will not be sufficient to effect a reform, because people have come to believe, or to pretend that they believe, animal food necessary to the highest bodily and intellectual vigor. And so he devotes a chapter to proving "animal food not necessary for the purpose of strength and corpulency". His method is the eclectic one of citing cases of vegetarians who were notably strong and healthy. But this is only one-half the picture; animal food is declared to be positively pernicious and to destroy health, spirits, and quickness of perception. From a number of cases in which intractable diseases were cured by a vegetable diet—and these examples could no doubt then, and certainly could now, be multiplied almost indefinitely—Ritson inferred that animal food was the cause of the ailment and that a vegetarian diet would have prevented it. It did not occur to him that it was not the use of animal food but the improper use of any food (as many of his medical authorities expressly stated<sup>79</sup>) which was to be censured. Nor did he experience difficulty in generalizing from individuals to nations subsisting entirely on vegetable food. Reduced to their logical absurdity, his arguments would deny health and peace of mind to those individuals, and prosperity and advancement to those nations, that indulged in animal food. This volume is the final outcome of his early advice to Frank on the morality of abstinence, but the condition of his mind or his own willfulness had prevented his seeing the absurdity of his conclusions. He constantly harks back to the sacredness of every form of animal life, and the epilogue to this erratic volume is very properly "Humanity". "If god made man", he concludes, "or there be any *intention* in nature", the lives of the animals over which he considers himself master, "are equally sacred and inviolable with his own".

Ritson's vegetarian diet had long been the butt of numerous quips and much sarcastic comment. A verse lampoon in the *St. James's Chronicle* of June 3, 1783, reveals the extent to which his dietetical eccentricity had gained publicity at that time. A contrast is drawn between his great compassion for the lower forms of animal life and his utter lack of sympathy with other men, especially in matters liter-

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 148 ff.

ary.<sup>80</sup> It is said that Holcroft probably intended the simple and amusing character of Handford, in his *Alwyn, or the Gentleman Comedian*, as an indirect satire upon Ritson's arguments on the inhumanity of eating animal food.<sup>81</sup> With the publication of Ritson's *Essay* comments came as thick as hail. Cutlet, an emotional butcher in Lamb's *The Pawnbroker's Daughter*, is made to sentimentalize in a highly ludicrous fashion over *Animal Food*.<sup>82</sup> The reviewers greeted the volume with shouts of laughter and hoots of derision,<sup>83</sup> and numerous comments appeared in the letters of literary men of the day.<sup>84</sup> Ritson had clearly failed in his object, whether it was simply to justify his own habit of life or to do this and to gain proselytes to it. Marks of incipient insanity are on every hand, and they can be explained only by the deranged mind and body whose strength, perhaps, had been in large measure undermined by the very habit he sought to defend.

Ritson was never physically robust. There can be little doubt that his ill health had its origin in a constitutional or hereditary malady, and it was certainly aggravated by his diet. If, as he suspected, he was afflicted by "an inveterate scurvy", nothing could have been more suicidal than limitation to a restricted diet through many years. By 1790 he began to suffer constantly from nervousness, insomnia, and inanition. His malady grew constantly more distressing until his liter-

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## THE PYTHAGOREAN CRITICK.

By wise Pythagoras taught young R-ts-n's meals  
 With bloody viands never are defil'd;  
 For Quadruped, for Bird, for Fish he feels:  
 His board ne'er smokes with roast meat, nor with boil'd.  
 In this one instance, pious, mild, and tame,  
 He's surely in another a great sinner;  
 For Man, cries R-ts-n, Man's my game!  
 On him I make a most delicious dinner.  
 To venison and to partridge I've no Gout;  
 To W-rt-n Tom such dainties I resign;  
 Give me plump St-v-ns, and large J-hns-n too,  
 And take your turkey and your savory chine.

<sup>81</sup>See Holcroft's *Memoirs*, pp. 112-3.

<sup>82</sup>*The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. by E. V. Lucas, 7 vols., London, 1903, Vol. V, p. 212 ff.

<sup>83</sup>See *Critical Review*, Vol. XXXVIII, pp. 16-7; *Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. LXXIII, ii, p. 95; *Monthly Review*, Vol. CXXIII, pp. 40-5; *Edinburg Review*, Vol. II, pp. 128-36; *British Critic*, November, 1803.

<sup>84</sup>See Nichols, *Lit. Anec.*, VII, p. 604; VIII, p. 50; *Constable and his Lit. Correspond.*, I, p. 503; *Memoirs, journal and correspondence of Thomas Moore*, ed. by J. Russell, 8 vols., London, 1853-6, Vol. VII, p. 13.

ary labors all but ceased. In January, 1802, he suffered a stroke of apoplexy and during the twenty-four hours in which he was deprived of all mental and physical faculties, was thought to be dying. Apropos of this event he remarked stoically: "The next attack, I suppose will carry me off".<sup>85</sup> In the spring of this year when he was planning a second trip to Paris, he was visited by another attack, and when partially recovered from it he went to Bath for a month. There he received only slight alleviation because he was too impatient to remain long enough for effective relief. He promised to return the next season, but his physician warned him that he would not live to see that time.<sup>86</sup>

To bodily illness was added pecuniary distress. It was at this time that his ill-advised speculation in the Stock Exchange utterly ruined him. To retrieve in a measure his lost fortune, he disposed of his remaining property in the North and with great reluctance sold a few of his books.<sup>87</sup> The following summer he was obliged to part with two other sections of his library.<sup>88</sup> Realizing that the end was near, he shrewdly determined upon insuring his life for £1000, as his friend Reed had done only a short time before death. He had proceeded favorably in his design with the Equitable Assurance Company when the directors learned of his recent illness and declined the business. Upon receipt of this news, Ritson says, "I turned my back and came away as cool as a cucumber".<sup>89</sup>

Early in September Ritson became violent, barricaded himself in his chambers, and drove off in a threatening manner all who approached him. He disturbed the members of the Inn by loud boasting of his accomplishments in confuting literary leaders, and by setting fire to a mass of papers which included many unfinished manuscripts. Only one person had influence with him in these paroxysms. This was Robert Smith, a fellow Inn-man, who cared for him until Joseph Frank arrived from the North.<sup>90</sup> Ritson was then removed to the country house of Sir Jonathan Miles at Hoxton, where he was attended by Dr. Temple of Bedford-Row. There he died at four o'clock in the morning, September 23, 1803. Four days later he was buried without ceremony of any kind and with the attendance of but a few personal friends, near the

<sup>85</sup>*Letters*, II, p. 215.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*, II, p. 229.

<sup>87</sup>This was in a miscellaneous sale at King's, and the exact date is unknown.

<sup>88</sup>May 4-10, 1803: an anonymous sale by Leigh and Sotheby, described as "the property of a well-known collector, consisting of English history, old English poetry, plays, etc."; and August 10, a further part at King's in the third day of the sale of Dr. Mitchell's books.

<sup>89</sup>*Letters*, II, p. 245.

<sup>90</sup>See his account of Ritson's last days. Appendix A.

grave of his friend John Baynes, in Bunhill Fields. Frank was immediately appointed administrator. He found that his uncle's debts ran very high and that there was no property but the library. He accordingly arranged for the sale of Ritson's books. The law books were disposed of by Leigh and Sotheby, in November.<sup>91</sup> The remainder of his library, including many rare books of medieval history and poetry, several of them plentifully supplied with his own notes, and what manuscripts had escaped the conflagration, was disposed of in the early days of December.<sup>92</sup> In addition to the proceeds from these sales Frank found it necessary to supply £500 from his own funds in order to liquidate his uncle's indebtedness.

Ritson's will, which had been executed on September 7, was not discovered for several days after his death. His nephew knew Ritson's wishes so well that all the directions contained in the will, except the last, were carried out before it was known they had been made. The last clause of the will reads:

"With respect to my funeral, (if I happen to die, that is, in the county of Middlesex, or the city of London), my most earnest request to my executor is, that my body may be interred in the burying ground of Burnhill fields, with the least possible ceremony, attendance, or expense, without the presence of a clergyman, and my coffin being previously, carefully and effectually filled with quick lime."<sup>93</sup>

One of Ritson's contemporaries remarked that he slipped away unnoticed, and his grave has been unnoticed since. No stone marks his resting place in Bunhill fields. There is a tradition that he desired to be forgotten by the world and to that end directed that his grave be immediately levelled and left to the care of nature,<sup>94</sup> but its only authentic support is the rather meagre evidence afforded by the following quotation from one of his letters to Thomas Hill, in which he declines an invitation to have his picture appear in the *Monthly Mirror*:

"Here, let me live, unseen, unknown,  
Here, unlamented, let me dye,  
Steal from the world, and ne'er a stone  
Tel where i lye."<sup>95</sup>

<sup>91</sup>With the books of John Topham, Treasurer of the Society of Antiquaries.

<sup>92</sup>These sales were well attended by publishers and antiquaries. See letters of Park and Hill, Add. MSS. 20083, ff. 98, 109, 122, etc.

<sup>93</sup>Quoted from Nicolas, *Op. Cit.*, p. lxxv.

<sup>94</sup>See E. Field, *Love affairs of a Bibliomaniac*, p. 93.

<sup>95</sup>*N. and Q.*, Ser. 2, Vol. XII, p. 222.

## CHAPTER IX

### CONCLUSION

Joseph Ritson was a man of little formal education but of much learning. If the terminology of the modern business world may be transferred to the intellectual sphere, he would be called a self-made man. His schooling was brief, being limited to the grammar forms. The child of poverty, he was put to a profession when young. But he was a foster-child of the muses, and instead of confining his attention to the book of common law and the statutes, he read widely and voraciously in history and medieval poetry. He read carefully and with insight and made notes in many of his books.<sup>1</sup> As the need for extending his knowledge of his own and foreign languages became apparent, he took up their study in a systematic and thorough-going fashion. He became proficient in Middle English and gained a familiarity with Anglo-Saxon at a time when the study of these dialects was just beginning. The thoroughness and accuracy of the extensive glossaries supplied with his collections of medieval poetry are sufficient testimony to his skill in this field. He acquired a working knowledge of Latin and French and strewed his essays with apt quotations from writers in these tongues. It is not improbable that he attained sufficient familiarity with Italian and Spanish to enable him to lay under contribution historical works in these languages, for he frequently alludes to and occasionally quotes from such sources. Greek he did not know beyond the letters of the alphabet. Nor was he proficient in German, although the growing interest in German literature attracted his attention and through the purchases which he made for his friend Harrison he learned something of the new publications in that language. Although not a man of remarkably extensive linguistic knowledge, he was thorough and accurate as far as his information allowed. Above all he recognized the value of comparative study and applied his knowledge of foreign languages to elucidate the early English and Scottish dialects.

Ritson was a prodigious worker. In spite of a constitutional disease which troubled him almost continually and frequently made writing

<sup>1</sup>From a calculation based on the Ritson sale catalogue, it appears that approximately half the volumes in his library were supplied with "MS. notes by Mr. Ritson, on separate sheets".



an impossibility, he prepared upwards of seventy volumes for the press and published half of them. These were nearly all collections of ancient poetry, songs, and ballads, and the collecting, verifying, annotating, and glossing was the painstaking labor of a life-time. He was able to work with great concentration and was aided by a wonderfully retentive memory which seldom failed him until illness had completely undermined his bodily strength and mental vigor.

In addition to his labor in collecting and publishing, Ritson was under the necessity of earning a livelihood. Only a few, and those the least expensive, of his publications paid for themselves. The profession of conveyancing to which he was bred was never of primary concern to him. He used it as a bread-and-butter profession only. But even so, his thoroughgoing habits and conscientious scruples caused him to master the subject in every detail and enabled him to publish some valuable antiquarian tracts on his office and the profession in general and gave him a respectable rank among the practitioners of his day.

Ritson's native field of labor was the Middle Ages. Half of his publications were collections of ballads, romances, and old songs. When his first collection appeared in 1783, the general interest in old poetry aroused by the *Reliques* had gained considerable headway. Volumes of ballads and ancient poems were appearing with a fair degree of regularity. Ritson joined the ranks of the literary gleaners and devoted a large part of the remaining years of his life to gathering up the scattered remnants of song and story which were dispersed in unknown or forgotten manuscripts or which held an uncertain tenure of life in the oral tradition of a people rapidly acquiring communication by the written word. In his efforts to rescue from oblivion and possible destruction these reliques of antiquity, he materially aided the romantic movement. If he was not a solitary forerunner of his age in recognizing the necessity for collecting popular poetry, his companions were very few. In the mere volume of the material which he amassed he exceeded any other man of his day. But it is not alone the matter which he collected, but the manner in which he handled it, that makes him the most important figure in ballad collecting between Percy and Scott.

It is always hazardous to attempt to designate any one man as the originator of a movement in literature. But in the sense of his being one of the first to practise editorial accuracy and the very first to insist upon it with such vehemence that others rectified their errors and confessedly stood in awe of his wrath, Ritson may be called the founder of the modern method of handling early English texts. He did not go the whole way to the present critical text, but he took the first and very essential step of insisting upon accuracy and fidelity to a single text.

He taught his generation to respect the literary remains of departed authors—instead of considering them as a legitimate plunder to be exploited, altered, and “improved” at will. In short, he taught men to speak the truth as they found it, even though the truth might be deemed offensive in the ear of a “cultivated age”. Detesting fraud and deception in the literary as in the business world, he would visit upon the one as condign a punishment as upon the other. In his admiration for truth he went to ridiculous extremes in carping and fault-finding, but no one can now doubt the value in his time of the line from Boileau which he took for the motto of his first publication,—a motto which represents his standard throughout all his editorial labors:

Rien n'est beau que LE VRAI; le vrai seul est amiable.

Without fidelity to sources and accuracy in transcribing in the early years of ballad collecting, many a “critical” text of today would have been an impossibility. Pinkerton and Percy might have gone on indefinitely publishing “ancient” poetry; meanwhile the *truly* ancient poetry would have become more and more remote and much of it must eventually have been irretrievably lost.

The antiquarian interest in old poetry was comparatively a recent development, and with it came a renewed curiosity in racial and national history. The English people began to inquire into the sources of their history and language and to attempt to establish their kinship with other nations. To the confused theories and faulty generalizations of the early investigators in this field Ritson applied his test of historical accuracy. He reduced the vagaries of Pinkerton to definite fact and assembled the historical materials from which accurate deductions could be made. In the revival of interest in local antiquities Ritson also had a share. He collected the songs of various northern localities, contributed to antiquarian histories, and made collections for his own history of Durham. But his service to antiquarianism in these various lines was not acknowledged. His unfortunate vein of acerbity, which manifested itself in nearly everything he wrote, aroused personal jealousies which barred him from membership in the Society of Antiquaries.

Ritson was for traveling the unbeaten paths. At a time when it had not yet become fashionable to be “different”, and in a day when the number of those who ran counter to the prevailing customs and ideas was relatively small, he was marked as a romanticist because of his Jacobinism and atheism, and because he advocated an eccentric system of spelling and adhered to a vegetarian diet. The desire to differentiate himself from the generality of mankind was due in large measure to personal whim but in part also to a deep-seated dissatisfaction with his time. His own day he looked upon as degenerate in politics, in morals, and in literature. For an antidote he looked to the remote past and

took pleasure in retrieving and illustrating the reliques of departed genius.

Joseph Ritson had his faults, and they were grievous. An unusual acidity of temper was exhibited in all his criticisms. He indulged a violence of language and a crude directness of speech which almost invariably gave offense. He was at odds with Warton and Shakespeare's editors, with Percy and Pinkerton, and he warred continually with the reviewers. He seemed in his own person to feel severely any attack, and from the pain thus acutely experienced he might have learned mercy but did not. He was despised as a critic though admired as a scholar. In all his writings he appeared cold, cynical, and unfeeling. Because he exhibited little poetic temper, because he usually judged verses by their antiquity and not by their intrinsic merits, he was stigmatized as pedantic. The unfavorable opinion of contemporaries was confirmed by Ritson's habits of life. His circle of acquaintances was not large, and he made no efforts to increase it. He knew Farmer, Reed, Steevens, Scott, and many less prominent persons, but his attacks upon Warton, Percy, Johnson, and others effectually cut him off from intercourse with them and with most of their friends. He lived the life of a recluse. He was never seen in court and was seldom encountered outside his chambers. He had little communication with those who lived about him and hardly knew the members of his own Inn. Every day his neat spare figure might have been seen moving rapidly from Gray's Inn to the British Museum and later back again. If one accosted him, he spoke briefly—even snappishly—while he moved about nervously and cast furtive glances in all directions as if seeking some means of escape. This daily walk was the extent of his exercise. At vacation time he slipped quietly away from London and spent a few weeks with friends and relatives in the north. These journeys were usually taken on foot, probably for the double purpose of reducing expenses and of securing the seclusion which he so much prized.

But there is another side to Ritson's character. Unattractive as he was to the stranger and repellant as he might be to the chance acquaintance, to his family and few intimate friends he was singularly kind, generous, and warm-hearted. His devotion to his father and mother, and after their death to his sister and her son, was sincere and disinterested. Those who knew him intimately say that when once within the seclusion of his chambers with a few tried friends, he became a lively and unreserved conversationalist. Although he was given to disputation and was tenacious of his own opinions, yet he was always open to conviction, and when once persuaded of his error he was quick to make frank reparation.

It is not known that Ritson ever sat for a portrait. He declined a request for an "original portrait" to be inserted in the *Monthly Mirror*, remarking facetiously that the only painting he had was an original of Ben Jonson, which he feared would not be accepted as a substitute. There is a silhouette in profile by Mrs. Park, which gives only a vague suggestion of his appearance. It is prefixed to the *Caledonian Muse* and to Haslewood's *Life of Ritson*. A half-length sketch by Gillray has been twice copied with the subject in slightly different positions. In the one which appears in *The Book of Days* he is represented as standing, quill in hand, before a table on which lies a book of poems; in the other he is before his book shelves, on which may be seen a few volumes suggestive of the outstanding characteristics of his life and work: Warton's *History*, the *Bible*, *Shakespeare*, *Metrical Romances*, and *Abstinence from Animal Food*. He is dressed in a long black coat closely buttoned about his thin form, and wears a high hat well down on his head. The forehead is bold, indicative of large intellectuality; the thin, pale face suggests inadequate nourishment. The nose is large, and the lower lip protrudes from a set and determinate jaw. The head is inclined slightly forward, and the shoulders are stooped from continual poring over books and manuscripts. But this is more of a caricature than a true portrait, say those who knew him personally. Gillray's sketch gives an inadequate conception of the "little neat old man, in his suit of customary black, with his gray hair and pale delicate complexion, tinged with 'Time's first rose'. He should have been taken in his evening chair, cheerfully chirruping some old saw or bardish rhyme".<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Surtees, *History of Durham*, III, p. 195, note y.

## APPENDIX A

### ROBERT SMITH'S NARRATIVE OF RITSON'S LAST DAYS AND DEATH, AND TWO LETTERS OF H. C. SELBY TO BISHOP PERCY.<sup>1</sup>

Narrative of Robt. Smith Esq. Bencher of Gray's Inn.

The late Mr. Ritson lived in the same Staircase with me in Gray's Inn for many years, and the common civilities of the Day passed between us, but nothing more. We never visited. I understood he possessed a great Singularity of Character, but he was ever polite and civil to me. Early in September, 1803, I frequently heard a great Swearing and Noise in his Chambers, and on meeting his Laundress on the Stairs, I asked her ye cause of the Disturbance I had heard. She answered, that she believed her *Master was out of his mind*, for his conduct in every respect proved him so, and that she was greatly afraid that in his Delirium he would do himself or her an injury. She said she had taken him his Dinner the Day before, but that he had not touch'd it and that he never ate animal Food. She was then going to him, but expressed a fear that he would burst into a Rage and abuse her as I had heard him before. The last time she was in the Chambers he had shut himself up; however she left his Dinner on the Table, and was then going to see if he had ate it. I said as she had expressed herself fearful I would go with her to her Master, which I accordingly did. I saw his Dinner on the Table, but he was still shut up in his Room. I ask'd the Laundress whether he had any relations in Town, she said he had not, but that he had a Nephew somewhere in the North who had lived with him for many Years, but that Mr. Ritson had *turned him out* of his House for *eating animal Food*. I desired her to endeavour to find out some of his Rela-

<sup>1</sup>This material is given from the original manuscript in the library of Charles Davis, Esquire, of Kew Gardens. It has been previously referred to in two letters of Bishop Percy to Anderson, *Literary Illustrations*, Vol. VII, pp. 139, 153; and Sir Sidney Lee mentions it in his life of Ritson in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Neither makes direct quotations from it. It is of interest in connection with the life of Ritson for two reasons. It gives the most exhaustive and the only intimate account of the morbid close of Ritson's life and effectively dissipates the haze of conjecture which has hitherto clouded comment on his end. Furthermore, it reveals the means taken by Percy to gain authentic information about the man who had for twenty years vigorously defamed his literary and personal character. The fact that Percy never published the material which he might then have used with telling effect is ample evidence of the generosity of his nature.

tions or Friends, and to apprise them of his unhappy Situation—and in the meantime to be very careful of him.

On the 10th of September about nine o'clock in the Evening, on my Return to Chambers, my Servant told me that Mr. Ritson had been making a great Noise, and that there was a great Light in his Room, which had alarmed the people in the Steward's office. I went immediately to the Steward's Office, and looking from his window I saw Mr. Ritson's Room strewed with Books and loose papers, some of which he was gathering up and throwing on the Fire, which occasioned the great Blaze, they had seen. He had a lighted chandle in his Hand which he carried about in a very dangerous manner. The Steward not being at home I sent for him to represent to him Mr. Ritson's extraordinary Conduct. However, being much alarmed, I went to Mr. Ritson's Chambers, and knocked at the Door several times, but could get no admission. At last a key was obtained from the Laundress, and Mr. Quin the Steward and myself with two Porters entered his Chambers. He appeared much confused on seeing us, and asked how we came in? We told him by means of the Laundress's Key. He then asked what we wanted? Mr. Quin told him we came in consequence of the great Blaze that appeared in his Chambers, believing them to be on Fire! He answered that his Fire had gone out, and that he was lighting it to make some Horse-reddish Tea.

Mr. Quin then represented to him the great Danger of making his Fire with loose papers, particularly as there was so many scattered about the Floor, some of which had actually taken Fire! Mr. Quin therefore begged he would permit the Porters to collect them together and put them away, and to do anything he wanted. Upon which he said No! No! and in the most peremptory manner ordered them to leave his Chambers, saying they were only Servants to the Society and had no Business in his Chambers. Mr. Quin observed that consistent with his Duty as Steward of the Inn he could not leave his Chambers in that Dangerous Situation. Mr. Ritson, then, appearing much enraged, swore he would make him, for that they came to rob him, and immediately went to his Bed-Room and returned with a drawn dagger in his Hand, at Sight of which Mr. Quin and the Porters immediately left the Chambers, Mr. Ritson pursuing them along the Passage, and they in their Hurry, shut the outer Door, leaving me in the Room. On his return I disarmed him, and begged him to sit down while I explained everything. He was then very complaisant, and said he did not mean to offend me, but swore Vengeance against those who had left the Room. He insisted on my going into his best Apartment, which I did and found his Books and papers scattered on the Floor as they were in the other Chamber, he asked me to drink with him but I refused. He paid me some Compli-

ments as a Neighbour, and said he would give me a History of his Life. He told me he had a great Passion for Books of which he possessed the finest Collection in England; That he had written upon many Subjects and had confuted many who had written on Law and Theology. He said he was then writing a pamphlet proving Jesus Christ an impostor but that something had lately discomposed him and he was therefore resolved to destroy many of his Manuscripts for which purpose he was then sorting his Papers!!! I heard him patiently for an hour and a half when I advised him to go to bed which he said he would do, and I left him seemingly composed. About an Hour after he became very violent and outrageous, throwing his Furniture about his Chambers, and breaking his Windows. I then went to him again and endeavored to pacify him but without Effect. He had a Dagger in one Hand and a Knife in the other, tho' I had taken the other Dagger from him and carried it to my own Chambers. He raved for a considerable time, 'till being quite exhausted he went to sleep. A person was then sent for from Megsdon to take care of him who remained with him five days, and said that his Derangement was incurable. I visited him every day when he appeared very glad to see me and said "here comes my Friend who will set me at Liberty" but violently abused his Keeper, and said *the Devil would torment him* for his Cruelty in keeping him so confined. It was thought proper by his Friends to remove him to a Madhouse where I understand he died in a few days. I have since learned that his Malady was a Family Disorder and that his Sister died mad.

31st March 1804.

ROBT. SMITH.

Gray's Inn, 6th April 1804.

My Dear Lord,

In consequence of your Lordship's letter of the 20th ult. which I was very happy to receive, as it gave me good Accounts of your Lordship's health, & that of your family, to all of whom I most sincerely wish well, I made application to my very worthy neighbor Mr. Smith, who I knew to be an intelligent man, who lived in the same Staircase with Ritson, & was well acquainted with all his whims and eccentricities, to give me the best and most particular relation he could to satisfy your Enquiries, for which purpose I read to him that part of your Lordship's last letter to me respecting it. Just as I was preparing to go into Essex, to pass a few days in the Easter holydays with my friends there, I received the foregoing report, which I hope may prove satisfactory to your Lordship. But as Mr. Smith in our conversation on the subject of Ritson's passions, prejudices, and sentiments in general, dropt some

expressions which I found he had omitted in the foregoing Recital, I gave him a call yesterday, and mentioned the Circumstances to him, which he perfectly recollected, and recapitulated them to me as he had done before. He says that Ritson frequently made such a noise and thumping in his Chambers as to disturb and alarm all his neighbors frequently, and that on these occasions he used to go down to Ritson's Chambers, which were on the first Floor or Story, & Smith's was on the 2d. and being a strong powerful Man, & Ritson *a mere spider* in comparison to him—he used to prevail on R. either by force, or by kind persuasions to give over making such a disturbance—at these times Ritson would appear sometimes very furious, enraged and violent to a degree and after he had fatigued himself by the Exertion of those horrid Passions he frequently, it seems, used to sit down, lay his hand in a pathetic and in a sort of ejaculating manner on his forehead & exclaim “Oh My God, what a miserable wretch am I!” “My poor distracted Head!” “When will there be an end of my distresses!” He would then start up again and act as wildly as before, until Mr. Smith who had obtained compleat command over him, insisted on his going again to bed, which he always did at Mr. Smith's request.

I ask'd Smith if He believed Ritson to be an Atheist,—his Answer was, that He did *not think so*:—else why should he send up ejaculations to God, or talk of *the Devil* tormenting people whom he believed had used him very ill. Smith said that he possessed the most consummate Pride, and had the highest opinion of his own Abilities in all Sciences; He say'd that He had had literary controversies with a great Number of Men of the First Talents in the Country, on subjects of their respective & several Studies; and that he had compleatly confuted *them all!!* As to the Benchers & Gentlemen of this Inn, they were all a parcel of Fools to him, & not worthy his Notice! He say'd he had for some time been engaged in writing the Work mentioned in Mr. Smith's Recital as before related by him—viz. “To prove *That Our Saviour Jesus Christ was an Impostor*”—but something had happened to prevent his finishing the work, & which therefore he had not then concluded; Whether He had been struck by conviction or by remorse, or from any and what other cause, it may be perhaps for ever impossible to say, but I understand that he consumed the Sheets, which contained what He had written on that extraordinary Subject, in the flames. I do believe that His Madness originated in his Pride, in thinking himself the most learned, and Extraordinary Genius of the Age in which he lived,—and that there were few if any that were fit for him to associate with in this world; what He thought, if he thought at all, of that which is to come, it is not in my



power to say not having had any sort of intercourse, or acquaintance with him.

I beg my most friendly respects to Mrs. Percy & such of your Family as are with you, and that your Lordship will believe me with the truest Esteem and regard,

Ever Your's most faithfully,  
H. C. SELBY.

Grays Inn, London.  
14th June 1804.

My Lord!

I hope the Complaint in your Eyes has been compleatly removed, which by your Lordship's last letter I observed had been very troublesome & inconvenient to you. I have lately seen Mr. Smith on the subject of your Lordship's letter to me, who has no sort of objection that a just & true Account should be given to the World, of the late Mr. Joseph Ritson's Character, Conduct & Principles, & which I conceive is very proper to be done; When I was with him (Mr. Smith) He sent for a woman of the Name of Elizabeth Kirby, who was a *native of the same Town*, viz. Stockton-upon-Tees, where Ritson drew his first breath, was about his own age, and perfectly well acquainted with him and all his family. This Mrs. Kirby informed us, that Ritson's father was a Menial Servant to a Tobacconist at Stockton—afterwards he served a Mr. Robinson a Merchant there, at which time his mother was also a servant in the same family and was with child to the Father before he married her, & which proved to be a Daughter who some time ago died of Madness! Ritson went to a Latin School at Stockton, and was clever at his books, & an apt scholar; On his quitting the Latin School he was put to a Conveyancer, a Mr. Bradley of the same town, who I understand knew his business extremely well. After having remained with him for some year or two, he came up to Town; He used to take his Journeys on foot, with a couple of shirts in his pocket, & if he found his bundle too heavy, he would, without hesitation, throw one of his shirts away! He was entered a Student of the Society of Grays Inn, & after keeping his Terms, & being of the proper Standing in the Inn, he was called to the Bar! in this transaction He could not but have taken the usual Oaths of Allegiance, Supremacy, &c. &c. as no person can be admitted to a Barrister without taking those Oaths. However I find by Mrs. Kirby's declaration and solemn affirmation, that in taking those Oaths He must have played the Hypocrite: For she says, that he *most undoubtedly* was an Atheist, & that He very often declared himself such to her:—He did not believe there was any such Being, as Almighty God!! or that there was any future State of Rewards or Punishments,

& the greatest devil he knew, was a nasty, crabbed, ill natured old Woman!! When he was young & at School, he never associated with other boys, but always with the girls, and they never liked his company, but got rid of him as well as they could; and at last he was forsook by everybody. This Mrs. Kirby is a very stout, hearty woman about 54 years of age, & she tells me that she had complete Mastery over him, and could make him do anything she pleased,—he was so much afraid of her. Of the rest of his History, Your Lordship is in possession, and at liberty to make what use of it you may think proper and right.

Your Lordship has been rightly informed as to Mr. Stirling's Residence, which for some time has been at No. 44 in Parliament Street, Westminster. Neither the size of my paper, nor the Shortness of my time at present, will permit me to give your Lordship the detail of my Reconciliation but I hope we shall be permitted to meet again in this world, when I will with pleasure give it you 'Vive Voce'. I dined at Northumberland House about three Weeks ago, with a small Party of Northumbrians, and was very cheerfully & agreeably entertained. The young ladies are very mild, easy, & good humoured—but seem more diffident than Ladies of their Rank generally do.

I beg to be most respectfully remembered to Mrs. Percy & all your Lordship's Family, and that your Lordship will believe always with great Veneration & Esteem, your Lordship's affectionate Friend, and most faithful Humble Servant.

H. C. SELBY

The Right Revd  
The Lord Bishop of Dromore  
Dromore-House  
Ireland.

## APPENDIX B

### PASSAGES CANCELLED IN RITSON'S *Ancient English Metrical Romances*

The passages cancelled in *Metrical Romances* because of their extreme personal bias and afterwards printed and bound with a few copies of the published work are here given together with the modified passages by which they were replaced. The cancelled material is italicized; the substitution which appeared in the regularly printed edition follows in square brackets.

#### VOL. I.

Page ix, line 7: Achilles, likewise, the celebrated champion of the Greeks, was the son of Thetis, a sea-gooddness; as Aeneas, the pretended founder of the Roman empire, was of Venus, the goddess of love; and all these fancies of a poetical imagination are to be *as firmly believed as the Jewish or Christian religion, the books of Moses, or the new testament*. [firmly believed, though nothing more than mere romance.]

Page xlvi, line 22: This Turpin is pretended to be the Archbishop of Rheims, whose true name, however, was Tilpin, and who died before Charlemagne, though Robert Gaguin, in his licentious translation of this work, 1527, makes him, *like Moses, the Jew prophet, relate his own death*. [like some one else, relate his own death.]

Page lx, line 6: The same effects had not long before been already produced upon the Romans, as they have in modern times upon the Mohawks, who, in consequence of *becoming Christians*, have lost all that was valuable in their national character, and are become the most despicable tribe that is left unexterminated. [a certain change.]

Page lxxv, note: The loss sustained by the vulgar of their Saxon version would have been effectually remedied by *their French one, and peradventure, it would have been just as well for the Saxons if they had never had a bible to read*. [the Latin Vulgate, which the priests continued to explain to them in their vernacular idiom (for, in fact, there was no French translation of the Bible); and the reading of it might have contributed to the knowledge of the Latin tongue.]

Page cxlviii, line 1: So that, it seems, the fabulous history of Geofrey of Monmouth was to have been the platform of his sublime poetical structure; *but he, whether wisely or not, abandoned one series of lies for another*. [but this project, whether wisely or not, he abandoned.]

## VOL. III

Page 238, line 20: Oaths and curses, in fact, are, at this day, common to most nations in the world, as they were formerly, to the Greeks and Romans. *They are foolish, no doubt, and unmeaning, but it is the extreme of bigotry and idiotism to consider them as wicked or punish them as criminal.*

Page 247, line 1: Merlin, a powerful magician, *and a more clear-sighted and veracious prophet than the Jew Isaiah*, was begotten by a devil, or incubus, upon a young damsel of great beauty, and daughter, as Geoffrey of Monmouth asserts, to the king of Demetia.

Page 247, lines 7, 11: He removed by a wonderful machine of his own invention, the giants-dance, now Stone-henge, from Ireland, to Salisbury plain, where part of it *by the favour of Almighty providence is still standing*; and in order to enable Uther Pendragon, king of Britain, to enjoy Igera, the wife of Gorlois, Duke of Cornwall, transformed him, by magical art, into the likeness of her husband; which amorous connection, (Igera being *like the Bathsheba of the old testament* rendered an honest woman by the murder of her spouse, and timely inter-marriage with king Uther,) enlightened the world, like another Alcmena, with a second Hercules, videlicet, the illustrious Arthur.

Page 248, line 15: His prophecies, which were first published in *The British History*, are *fulfilling every day, like those of the old clothesmen of Judaea, or the still more Merlinical rhapsodist of The Revelation of the New Jerusalem*. [have since gone through repeated editions, in Latin, French, and English.]

Page 321, line 28: That the Christians of former ages, *a most ignorant, bigoted and superstitious sect*, appear to have entertained an inveterate antipathy to the Mahometans (who, certainly, would not have been much less intolerant) is apparent from the ancient romances of chivalry, French or English, in which this equally polite and religious appellation, frequently occurs.

Page 349, line 5: *This was Jesus Christ, who, in the interval between his crucifixion and his ascension, made an inroad into the infernal regions and plundered them of all the damned souls he thought worth carrying off. This miraculous event, though unnoticed by the four evangelists, is nevertheless circumstantially related in the Gospel of Nicodemus; and in honest Tom Hearne's appendix to his edition of John Fordun, the Scotchman's lying chronicle, is the engraving of an ancient picturesque representation thereof, in which Christ (not Saint Patrick, as is falsely pretended by Doctor Johnson) in so desperate an adventure, armed with his invincible cross, is opposed at the very mouth of hell fire, by a devil*

blowing a horn and exclaiming in a manner truly diabolical, "OUT OUT ARONGST." (Refer to page 1402-3; and, for what Johnson has said, to Stevens's *Shakspeare* 1793, vii, 342.) It seems alluded to in the first epistle of Peter iii, 18, 19: "For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the spirit; by which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison," and in the apostles' creed, it is expressly said "He descended into hell." [This means Jesus Christ, who, in the interval between his crucifixion and ascension, is said, in the apostles' creed, to have "descended into hell". This visitation is related, most at large, in Nichodemus's Gospel. In Hearne's Appendix to Fordun's *Scotichronicon* (p. 1482-3), is a singular engraving from an old illumination, in which "*Ihesus Christus (resurgens a mortuis spoliat infernum,*" not Saint Patrick, as Dr. Johnson mistakes) "is represented", as he says, "visiting hell, and putting the devils into great confusion . . . of whom one . . . [with a prong and a horn] has a label issuing out of his mouth, with these words, "OUT OUT ARONGST!" (Note in *Shakspeare*, 1793, VII, 342.)]

## APPENDIX C.

### I. A BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE PUBLISHED WORKS OF JOSEPH RITSON.

1. *Versees addressed to the Ladies of Stockton. In the Newcastle Miscellany*, 1772.  
     Reprinted at Newcastle, n. d.  
     Again, as an Appendix to Joseph Haslewood's *Some Account of the Life and Publications of the Late Joseph Ritson, Esq.* London, 1824.
2. *Tables, shewing the descent of the Crown of England.* 1778.  
     Second impression, 1783.
3. *The St\*ckt\*n Jubilee: or, Shakspeare in all his glory.* Newcastle, 1781.
4. *Observations on the three first volumes of the History of English Poetry. In a Familiar Letter to the Author.* London, 1782.
5. *Fabularum Romanensium Bibliotheca: a general catalogue of old Romances, French, Italian, Spanish and English.* 2 vols. London. [Only two sheets printed.]
6. *Remarks, Critical and Illustrative, on the Text and Notes of the Last Edition of Shakspeare.* London, 1783.
7. *A Select Collection of English Songs, with their Original Airs; and a Historical Essay on the Origin and Progress of National Song.* 3 vols. London, 1783.  
     Second edition, with additional songs and occasional notes by Thomas Park. 3 vols. London, 1813.
8. *The Bishoprick Garland, or Durham Minstrel. Being a choice collection of Excellent Songs relating to the above county.* Stockton, 1784.  
     New edition, corrected, Newcastle, 1792.  
     Again, See No. 33.
9. *Gammer Gurton's Garland: or the Nursery Parnassus; a choice collection of Pretty Songs and Verses, for the amusement of all little good children who can neither read nor run.* Stockton, 1784.  
     Reprinted, with additions, London, 1809.  
     Again, London, 1810.  
     Again, Glosgow, 1866.
10. *The Spartan Manual, or Tablet of Morality: being a genuine Collection of the Apophthegms, Maxims, and Precepts, of the Philosophers, Heroes, and other great and celebrated Characters of*

*Antiquity; under proper heads. For the Improvement of Youth, and the promotion of Wisdom and Virtue.* London, 1785.

Reprinted privately, Glasgow, 1873.

11. *The Comedy of Errors*, with notes. London, 1787. [Only two sheets printed.]
12. *The Quip Modest; a few words by way of Supplement to Remarks, Critical and Illustrative, on the Text and Notes of the Last edition of Shakspeare; occasioned by a Republication of that Edition, revised and augmented by the Editor of Dodsleys Old Plays.* London, 1788.
13. *The Yorkshire Garland: being a curious collection of old and new songs concerning that famous county.* Part I. York, 1788. [It was never continued.]  
Again, See No. 33.
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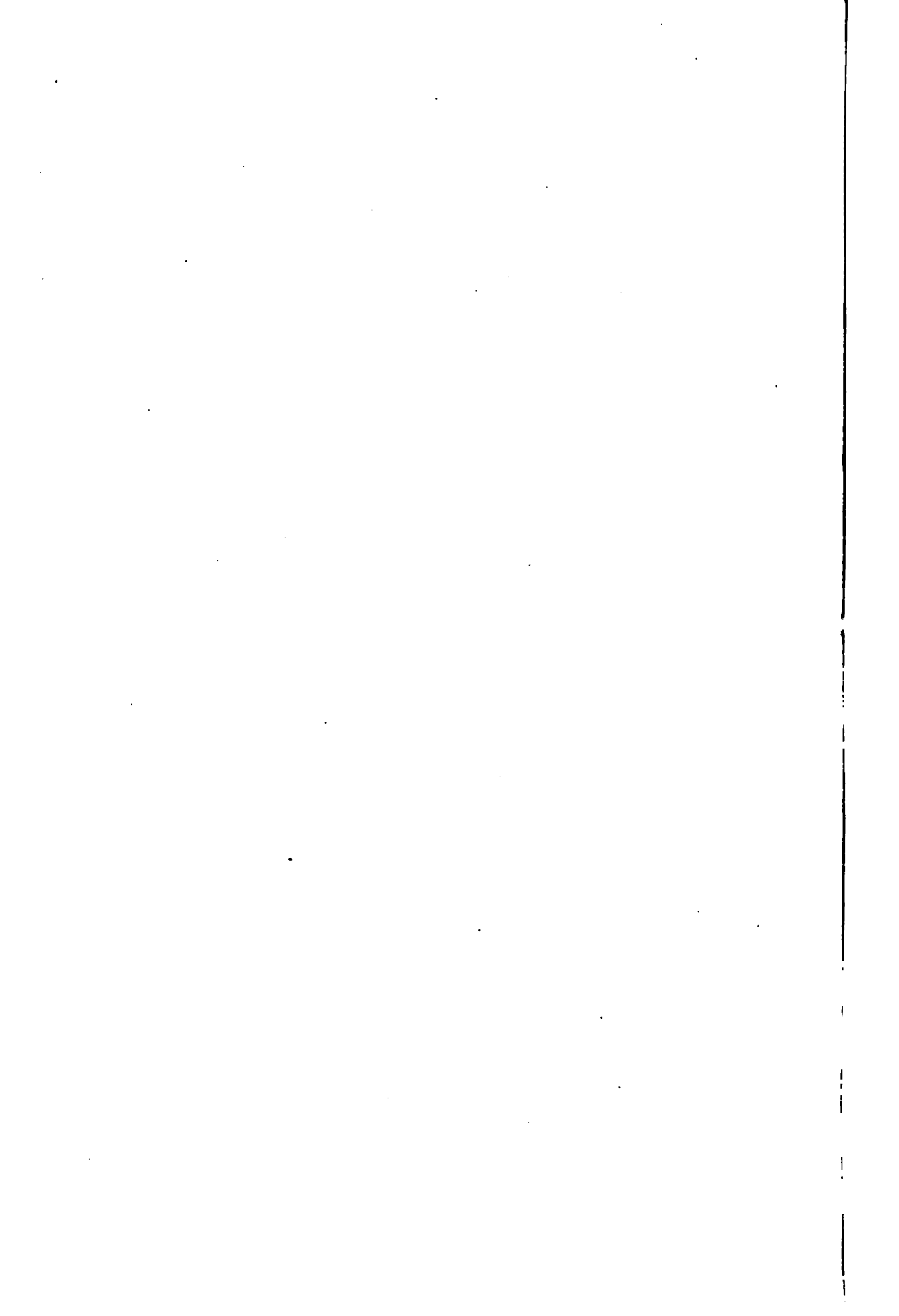
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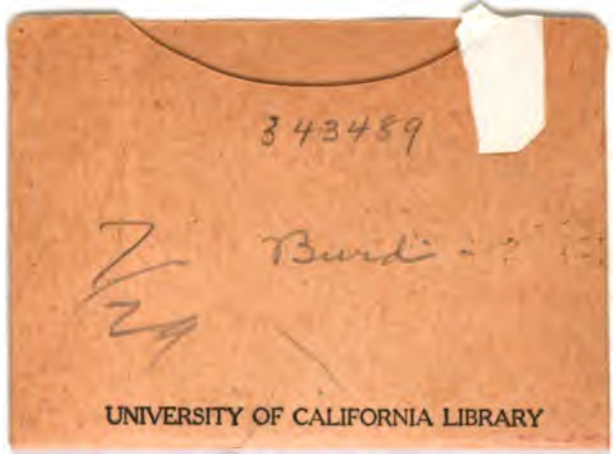
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